

Will to Live

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Will to Live

by [Lise](#)

Summary

Thanos is dead and the war is over, but the universe hasn't seen fit to give Thor anything back. When he finds out that there might be a way to return at least one person to life...how can he not take the chance?

Unfortunately, everything has a price.

Notes

So I know I wrote kind of [another version of this](#) not too long ago, but...then there's also this one, which I'm pretty sure is 90% [led-lite](#)'s fault, and exploded into a huge thing, and before I knew it I had sixty pages written and was still going strong. This just happens sometimes, I guess. Especially when I'm basically writing a whole bunch of sibling angst crammed together with a bunch of tropes that I also love. Seriously, I had a great time writing this, and you can tell because of how much everyone in it suffers.

Many thanks to my [loyal beta](#) for finishing this monster on a deadline, and helping me out of a plot hole I fell into halfway through.

Enjoy the show. And mind the tags - this one does get pretty dark (before it gets better).

Chapter 1

If Thor were a better person - a better *friend* - he might be able to find joy in the return of others' loved ones. As it was, his foremost thought was, like a child, *it isn't fair*.

He had lost everything, and gotten none of it back. His people were a remnant of a remnant - though they still lived, their spirits seemed broken, and Thor could not find the will to lift them, not when his own were barely glowing embers.

He was exhausted, and grieving, and without the motivating power of revenge he felt almost too heavy to move.

Valkyrie - Brunnhilde, she'd told him, as though she were sharing a secret - found him sitting on the cliffside where Odin had passed into Valhalla, staring at the night sky. He felt her staring at his back for several moments but didn't turn; finally, she sat down next to him.

"Drink?" She asked, holding out a bottle. Thor took it, eyed it, and downed what was left in it before throwing it out to sea.

Brunnhilde scowled. "I wasn't done with that."

"You should be," Thor said roughly. "Asgard needs you sharp. Not dulled by drink."

"Asgard needs her king leading, not moping in the dark," Brunnhilde shot back. Thor felt his expression tighten and said nothing. *Do I not have the right to grieve? He wanted to snap at her. Do I not have the right to hurt? How much must I bear before I am allowed to bend under its weight?*

After a long pause, Brunnhilde shifted, and sighed. "Look," she said, and then stopped. "Your brother. He was..."

"Be careful how you finish that sentence," Thor said, a rumble in his voice. She gave him a sharp look.

"You want me to lie? He was an ass. But he was an ass I could've liked. I'm sorry."

Thor's hands balled into fists. "He should be here."

"Wish the world worked that way."

"It worked that way for everyone else," Thor said, his voice sharpening, rising. "But not for my people, not for Heimdall, not for *Loki*." He could feel the lightning rising in him, power surging in his veins, and fought it for control (didn't want to fight it, wanted to let go and let the storm rage).

"I remember when Kára died," Brunnhilde said. "When Hela killed her. She died protecting me, and I...I couldn't let go, right? Couldn't take it."

"Is this supposed to help," Thor said.

"It's shit," Brunnhilde said, not answering. "But it gets better. Sort of. You learn to live with it after a while. Not right away - I spent a fucking *decade* chasing down anything I could find about bringing people back from the dead."

Thor fell still. "What did you find?" He asked, slowly. Brunnhilde gave him a quick, sharp, glance.

“Nothing good,” she said. “Most of it’s - a hoax.”

“Most,” Thor said.

“What isn’t isn’t worth the cost,” Brunnhilde said bluntly. “It’s wrong, Thor. Unnatural. And you always end up paying too much for it.”

Thor felt his expression harden. “Tell that to Steve Rogers,” he said. “Or to Nebula. Or to Rocket, or-”

“It’s different,” Brunnhilde said. “You know it is-”

“Why,” Thor demanded. “Because it’s Loki?”

“Thor-”

He turned toward her. “If you know something,” he said. “If you know *anything*. Tell me.”

“I don’t,” Brunnhilde said, but Loki was a better liar than she was.

“Don’t lie to me,” Thor said, his voice a rumble. Brunnhilde stared at him, a muscle twitching in her jaw. “If you won’t tell me, I’ll only have to go looking for myself.”

“Are you trying to get to me by threatening to be an idiot?” Thor just looked at her, waiting, and she exhaled. “Fine,” she said. “You really want to know who has that kind of power?”

“Yes,” Thor said, without hesitation.

“You’ve met him,” Brunnhilde said, voice flat as a sheet of metal. “You helped start a revolution on his planet.”

Thor’s eyes widened. “What?”

“Yep,” Brunnhilde said. “Don’t let the attitude fool you. Gast has *serious* power. He just doesn’t feel the need to use it, most of the time. But there were a couple times when one of his champions - the ones before Hulk - died before he wanted them to. So he brought them back.”

Thor’s heart did something strange in his chest. Almost like it was restarting after having stopped. “Just like that.”

“Yeah,” Brunnhilde said. “Like *that*.” She snapped her fingers. “And it was awful. Every time. They got out and he dragged them back in because he couldn’t let them rest.”

Thor rose to his feet. “You call what happened to Loki *rest*?” He demanded. “You didn’t see him die. You didn’t see him struggling for air until his neck finally snapped.”

Her face was a little pale, but she stood as well. “*Finally*,” she said. “That’s it, right there. It was over, and you want to drag him back into it - that doesn’t strike you as *selfish*?”

Thor gritted his teeth and started back toward the settlement that was New Asgard’s temporary home, turning his back on her. His heart was pounding in his ears. Brunnhilde caught him up after a few strides. “Come *on*, Thor,” she said. “You know this is wrong. You *know* it. Stop and think a second-”

What seemed like eons ago, Thor remembered: *it’s madness*, Loki had said, before they’d gone to Jotunheim and everything had fallen apart. If he could go back...

“I don’t need to think,” Thor said. He needed Stormbreaker. “I’m going to get Loki.”

“Fucking *dammit*, Thor, would you *stop*?”

“No,” Thor said. “I will not. You can’t stop me. If you try to get in my way - don’t try to get in my way.”

“What are you going to do,” Brunnhilde said, “fly a ship all the way to Sakaar and demand Gast bring him back?”

“No,” Thor said grimly. “I’m going to use Stormbreaker to go to Sakaar and demand he bring Loki back.”

“He’s not going to do it for free. *If* he agrees at all.”

“I didn’t expect anything else.” Thor reached his cabin and almost flung the door open, grabbing Stormbreaker from where it was leaning against the wall.

“And what do you think you’re going to offer?”

Thor walked out of the cabin, axe in hand, and turned to look at her. “I guess we’ll see what he asks,” Thor said. He saw her open her mouth, but didn’t give her the chance to say anything more.

For the first time since Thanos had dropped Loki to the floor in front of him, limp and lifeless, Thor felt something like hope.

Thor landed in the middle of a party.

Literally in the middle of a party: he stood in the midst of stunned looking, gaudily dressed courtiers, all of whom had gone perfectly silent. The man in the middle of it all, looking exactly the same as Thor had last seen him, blinked once.

“Well, look who it is,” the Grandmaster said. “Sparkles! What a surprise.”

“We need to talk,” Thor said.

“I don’t suppose you brought back my champion, did you? It was - *very* rude of you to run off with him in the first place, but I might see my way to forgiving you if you brought him back with you.”

“No,” Thor said. “I didn’t.”

The Grandmaster frowned. “Disappointing. You know, out of the four of you troublemakers, you’re really the one I *least* wanted to see again. And barging into my party, wrecking my furniture - I don’t like it one *bit*.”

“I’m sorry,” Thor said, though it felt like chewing rocks to say it. “I need to ask you for a favor.”

The Grandmaster’s eyebrows crept upwards and he leaned forward, ever so slightly. “A *favor*. What kind of favor?”

Thor was keenly aware of all the eyes watching. “I’d rather discuss that in private.”

“In private,” the Grandmaster said, and something about the way he smiled made Thor’s skin crawl. “You would, would you? All right, all right - I’ll humor you, Sparkles. Since you’ve got me...curious.” He stood up, holding his drink out without looking for someone to take it, which

they did. Then sauntered over to Thor. He stood there, just smiling at him, before one of his hands flashed up quick as lightning.

Thor caught it, turning his head just a fraction to see the disc he was holding. Anger flared in his belly that he pushed down. "Don't," he said flatly. The Grandmaster's eyes gleamed.

"Can't blame a guy for trying," he said, but when Thor let him go he just turned toward the door. "Come on then, Sparkles. Let's chat."

Thor rolled his shoulders back, glanced around at the party, and followed, axe still in hand. He caught up to the Grandmaster in a few strides, carefully matching him.

"Very bold of you," he said. "Coming back here, after that stunt you pulled. Stealing my champion, my favorite scrapper, *and* my favorite - ah - favorite. And stealing one of my ships! That must've been Loki, right? So naughty."

Thor's stomach lurched and he said nothing.

"Anyway - like I said, very bold. That's not - necessarily a bad thing! Just, well. Surprising. That axe is new, isn't it? Seems pretty, uh, special."

"It is one of a kind," Thor said simply.

"Nice, nice," the Grandmaster said. He didn't seem very worried about Thor's having it. Either he was a madman or he didn't think Thor was a threat.

Which he wasn't. He needed what the Grandmaster could do too much. Which meant he needed to convince him to do it. Persuasion wasn't his gift. Guile, a cunning tongue, he'd always had *Loki* for that.

That's why you're here.

"Here we go," the Grandmaster said, opening a door and gesturing with a flourish. "This should do - after you, you're the guest."

Every instinct Thor possessed told him not to turn his back. He didn't dare object, though, not now. He walked in, and the Grandmaster followed after, closing the door behind him.

"So," he said. "What's your pitch? I hope it's interesting, because you're, well, I'd hate to have wasted all this time on something *boring*."

Thor took a deep breath and let it out. "Brunnhilde - Valkyrie - *Scrapper-142* told me that you've brought some of your warriors back from the dead."

"Might've done, once or twice," the Grandmaster said with a careless shrug. "Mortals, you know, they up and die so *easily*, it's just - total bummer."

Thor's heart leapt into his throat. "So - you can do it."

"That's what I said, wasn't it?" The Grandmaster didn't sound *annoyed*, exactly, but he did frown. "Do I have to repeat everything?" He paused, and then eyed Thor, and guffawed. "Wait, wait. I get it. You're going to ask *me* to - to resurrect someone for *you*. Oh, that's - that's just hilarious, Sparkles, it's cute. Who is it? Lover? Best friend?"

Thor's throat closed and he had to clear it before the words would come out. "My brother."

The Grandmaster frowned. "You've got two?"

"No," Thor forced out. "Loki. I want..." No. "I am asking you to bring Loki back."

"Oh," the Grandmaster said after a brief pause. "Oh dear. Are you telling me that he went and, uh - *died*?" He sounded less upset than - offended. Thor's gut twisted and he worked his free hand, the one not holding Stormbreaker, open and closed.

"Yes," he said, finally. "Thanos murdered him."

The Grandmaster pursed his lips. "Unbelievable," he said, though it sounded like it was directed at himself. "That's just - that's so *sad*. Such a charming boy, struck down in his prime--"

Thor couldn't listen to this. "Will you do it," he interrupted. "Will you bring him back?"

"We-ell," the Grandmaster said. "That's the question, isn't it?"

Damn you, answer it, Thor wanted to snap. He held his tongue, with an effort.

"I *would*," the Grandmaster said. "Just because - well, you know, I'm nice like that. But I don't know. Sets kind of a precedent, doesn't it? I'd have everyone in the wide universe here, begging, pleading - sounds awfully dreary to me."

"I wouldn't tell anyone," Thor said immediately. "I wouldn't say a word that it was you."

"Easy to say," the Grandmaster said, wagging a finger. "But - well, you're trickier than you look, aren't you? Stealing off with my champion, and all. How *is* he, by the way? Good? I *do* hope you didn't get *him* killed."

"He's fine," Thor said, something in him clenching at *get him killed*.

"Good, good. Anyway, though - I'm going to need a little more than a promise, I'm afraid. Not that I - just for *form*, you understand."

"I understand," Thor said. Close. He was so close, all he had to do was make the deal, and he *would*.

"Good! Glad to hear it. So, here's the thing," the Grandmaster said. "I *can* bring Lo - Loki - back. And I'd *like* to." Thor exhaled in a great rush, relief flooding him. "But not for free."

Thor straightened up, setting his jaw. "What do you want?"

"Well, I just don't know," the Grandmaster said. "Make me an offer, how about that, maybe I'll get...inspired."

"I'd fight," Thor offered. "In one of your matches."

"Just one?"

Thor felt a whisper of doubt, but - Loki. "How many would you ask?"

The Grandmaster tapped a finger against his lips. "No, I don't...no, I'm not feeling that. Something else."

He didn't have Asgard's wealth to offer, or a useful alliance. He hardly had anything. Just...himself.

Thor took a breath and steeled himself. "If you wanted..." The Grandmaster just blinked innocently at him, and Thor hunted for the right words. "I would be willing to..."

"Oh! Oh, no thanks," the Grandmaster said, waving a hand. "Don't take this the wrong way, but - you're not really my type. I mean, you could be, but...no thanks."

No. Thor felt his chance slipping through his fingers and cast about desperately for something convincing he could offer.

"Wait," the Grandmaster said, sitting up and raising a finger. "I think I've got it, actually. Oh, yes. I know what...oh, yes, of *course*."

He sounded pleased with himself. Thor tensed, and made himself think of Loki, alive, breathing. "What do you want?"

"Loki," the Grandmaster said. Thor started.

"What...do you mean?"

"I bring him back," the Grandmaster said casually, "and I...well, see, what I *want* is...I get to keep him. Here. With me."

Thor's relief went cold. "What?"

"Goodness, you're - you're a bit slow, aren't you? I *said*, Loki stays here. I bring him back, you can hug, kiss, whatever - and he settles down here and you go...wherever."

Thor's jaw worked. "Why?" He asked.

"Just cause," the Grandmaster said. "Well, also - I like him. Liked him? He was a fun one. Good to have around. I'm willing to let bygones be bygones, kiss and make up. And if I send him off home with you - *well*. People will say I'm playing favorites."

Because you never do that otherwise, Thor thought, his jaw clenching. "If there's anything else-"

"Really?" The Grandmaster interrupted. "Anything?"

"Is there?" Thor asked, altering his question.

"No," he said. "Not actually, really - I've more or less...hm, yeah. Deal or no deal?"

Thor closed his eyes. He thought of Loki, stuck on this planet with this madman.

He thought of Loki, dead on the floor of the Statesman, limp and lifeless, and the hole in Thor's heart.

"I have a condition," he said. The Grandmaster steepled his fingers under his chin.

"A condition? All right. I've gotta hear this."

"Loki will stay here," Thor said, "but I can see him whenever I want. I'll be welcome here, without interference - without anyone trying to put one of those discs on me, or trying to attack me. Loki might not be able to leave here. But I'll be able to come to him, without fear for my safety, or for his."

The Grandmaster's eyebrows twitched up. "Fear for his - goodness, *Sparkles*, you don't think I'd

hurt him, do you?” Thor said nothing, and the Grandmaster looked like he was going to pout. “I wouldn’t! Never.”

“My condition,” Thor said. “Do you accept it?”

The Grandmaster frowned. “Are you going to ruin one of my parties every time you visit?”

“I’ll endeavor to have better placement for my landing,” Thor said, his heart starting to beat faster. The Grandmaster examined him for several too long seconds.

“All right, then,” he said. “Sounds good. I keep Loki, you get visitation rights. Good?”

Something in Thor twisted uneasily at *keep Loki*, but he shoved it aside. “Unlimited visitation rights.”

“Yes, yes,” the Grandmaster said with a wave of his hand. “Unlimited.”

“Then yes,” Thor said. “We are agreed.”

He expected some kind of oath. Or contract. But the Grandmaster just rubbed his hands together. “Okay. Let’s get started, then - you brought his body, right?”

Thor’s stomach lurched like he’d missed a step on the stairs. “His...”

The Grandmaster frowned. “Well, I need a *body* to work with. Sheesh, Sparkles, really, you...? I can’t just slam something together from *scratch*, that’s - well, very messy, almost never works. One time - oh, doesn’t matter. Anyway, are you - you’re serious, you didn’t even bring his *body*?”

A wretched, wrenching kind of sadness rolled over Thor. “I - couldn’t.”

“What do you mean, couldn’t?” The Grandmaster asked. “Don’t tell me you *lost* it. That’s just careless.”

“I didn’t-” Thor’s eyes burned. He remembered clinging to Loki’s chest, sobs ripping through him as the ship disintegrated around them. And when the Guardians had found him, he’d been alone. “I didn’t exactly get a choice. The ship we were on exploded. I...his body...”

The Grandmaster sighed, heavily. “You’re really not making this easy for me, are you,” he said aggrieved. Thor felt a surge of nerves.

“But you - can you still do it? If you need-”

“No, no, I can do it,” the Grandmaster said with a wave of his hand. “It just makes things *harder*. Give me a minute.”

Thor held his breath, waiting. He couldn’t see anything, not like he could with Frigga or Loki, but he could feel it - a strange tingle on his skin, a building of pressure.

There was a quiet *pop* and Loki winked into existence on the floor. Thor jerked forward, for a moment thinking—

Blank eyes, shot with blood, stared through him. He was frozen - literally frozen - just as Thor had seen him. Still dead, and his eyes with their burst blood vessels, the ring of dark bruises around his throat, seemed to accuse. He heard himself make a choked noise, but he couldn’t look away.

“Mmm,” he heard the Grandmaster say. “Goodness. That’s...well. *Unpleasant*.”

Thor couldn't tear his eyes away from Loki. *Do it now*, he wanted to shout. *I can't keep looking at him like this*, but he wouldn't stop, either. He moved forward, slowly, half reaching out to touch him.

"Ah," the Grandmaster said. "Don't do that. You'll mess with the process."

"The..." Thor realized that looking closely he could see the ice melting off Loki's body, though as it did it left blue skin behind. Jotun skin, and Thor couldn't help but stare. He'd never seen Loki like this before.

(He knew he was focusing on minutiae to avoid thinking *what if this doesn't work, what if he's lying, what if-*)

A twitch. A tremor, running through Loki's body, like a shudder, and Thor stopped breathing.

Loki inhaled, a rasping, awful, sound that made Thor's spine crawl. He glanced at the Grandmaster, who was still standing still, looking at Loki with strange, rapt, attention.

Then Loki started screaming.

It was a thin, strained, scream, like it was - like it was being forced out of a crushed throat, and Loki's body seized up, shaking. Thor lurched forward with a cry.

"Hold it!" The Grandmaster said. "Stay *right* there, this is delicate stuff-"

"You're *hurting* him!" Thor shouted.

"He'll be fine," the Grandmaster said dismissively. Loki's back arched, Jotun-red eyes wide open as he kept on making that thin, rasping sound, almost more a high whine than a scream. Spasm after spasm contorted Loki's body and Thor clenched his hands into fists, nails digging into his palms, trembling with the effort to hold still.

That strange tingle on Thor's skin vanished, and Loki went limp, his eyes finally closing.

Thor couldn't hold himself back. He threw himself forward on his knees next to Loki, reaching out with a shaking hand, looking for life, he seemed so *still*-

No, Thor realized. He could hear Loki breathing. Quiet, shallow, maybe a little unsteady, but he was breathing.

Thor's exhale felt like a sob. He reached out to cup Loki's neck only to shy away at the sight of lingering bruises, touching his face instead. His blue skin was cold to the touch but didn't burn, and he could feel the ridges of the raised markings there, and Loki was *alive*.

"That's just - so moving," the Grandmaster said, and Thor briefly hated him even more, but even that was overwhelmed by relief, a sense of being whole again. He moved his hand down over Loki's heart.

"His neck," Thor said, his voice coming out choked. The Grandmaster hummed.

"Yes, yes. There's a few, ah, glitches, surface marks tend to...last a little longer. Unfortunate, really, there was a fellow who...oh, never mind. They'll go away and he'll be pretty as ever."

Thor only really heard *they'll go away* and nodded, exhaling. He still couldn't take his eyes off Loki, half afraid that if he did he would vanish, or this would all be revealed to be a cruel trick.

“Loki,” he said, lowly, but anything else he wanted to say - he didn’t want to say in front of this madman. He turned his head, finally, to look up at the Grandmaster, who looked nothing so much as idly amused. “Thank you,” Thor made himself say.

“You’re welcome, Sparkles,” the Grandmaster said. He didn’t seem surprised by the change in Loki’s appearance; Thor wondered if he’d seen Loki like this before or if it just didn’t register. Either way, it didn’t matter. A strand of Loki’s hair had fallen into his face, and Thor tucked it tenderly back.

Loki made a small noise and Thor immediately tensed, leaning forward. He wanted to be the first thing Loki saw when he opened his eyes. Loki’s eyelids fluttered and Thor almost held his breath.

Loki’s eyes blinked open and they were bleary and confused but they moved, fixing slowly on Thor, though without recognition. For a terrified moment Thor thought *he doesn’t remember*, and then for another moment thought *maybe that’s a good thing*, and then Loki’s eyebrows furrowed, the dark pupils in his red eyes dilating.

“Thor?” He said, voice hoarse. Thor’s eyes stung.

“It’s me,” he said. “Loki, brother-”

“Welcome back, sweet thing,” the Grandmaster said cheerfully. Thor ignored him.

“Thor,” Loki said. “What...” He coughed, weakly, and Thor’s breath caught.

“It’s all right,” he said. “You’re...”

“Thor,” Loki said again. “What the *fuck* did you do?”

“I’ll leave you two for some private time,” the Grandmaster had said, with a bizarrely suggestive wink. Thor hadn’t even glanced at him, staring hungrily at Loki. Loki, who still hadn’t spoken again, though his skin had faded back to its more usual pale hue.

His eyes were still red, though. Not Jotun-red. Just the red of burst blood vessels. Thor’s stomach heaved briefly into his throat and he controlled himself.

“Loki,” Thor said finally, though he’d meant to wait for Loki to speak first. He seemed to have forgotten Thor was there.

“Shut up,” Loki said. Thor jerked back, surprised and not a little hurt.

“What-”

“The Grandmaster-” Loki cut off, clearing his throat, or trying. He coughed, one hand rising to his neck but it fell away before he made contact. “The Grandmaster does nothing for free. What did you sell?”

Oh, Thor thought with dread. He’d thought they’d have longer before he had to address this.

You. I sold you. He took a deep breath. “I was desperate,” he said hoarsely. Loki turned toward Thor slowly.

“Thor,” he said, dread seeping into his expression. “Tell me you didn’t-”

Thor hunched his shoulders. “It isn’t - *I* don’t have to do anything.”

For a moment, Loki looked relieved, and Thor's heart lightened marginally. Then he tensed again. "Then who does?"

Thor did not want to be the one to break this news. He'd hoped, *very* much, to have more time. But he wasn't going to lie.

"His condition for bringing you back was that you had to stay here," Thor said. Loki just stared at him in seeming incomprehension.

"I misheard you," Loki said after a moment, strangely faint. "Tell me that I misheard you."

Thor swallowed. "I'm not leaving you here alone," he said quickly. "I'll be here too, I made certain he understands that-

"You *are* serious," Loki said.

"It was the only way," Thor said.

"The only-" Loki choked, and for a moment Thor panicked. "The *only* way? Thor, you *dragged me out of Valhalla*, away from *our mother*, and *sold me to a madman!*"

Thor rocked back, the breath leaving his lungs. *Dragged me out of Valhalla*. He'd - *known*, he supposed, but it hadn't mattered, not until Loki said it. *It was over, and you want to drag him back into it*, he remembered Brunnhilde saying, and his stomach sank. "I didn't-

"Didn't think, yes, that's obvious," Loki said, and yet even as angry as his voice sounded all Thor could think was that it was *his voice*, that Loki was *here* and *breathing*. He could hardly think of anything else, except-

Mother. Was she well? Is she happy?

"I'm..." The apology caught in his throat. Thor could not say *I'm sorry* because the fact was that he *wasn't*. Couldn't be. "I missed you," Thor said, but that was too little. "When you...a piece of my heart died with you. I lost *everything* and I could not bear-

"And what about what I cannot bear?" Loki demanded. "What about that? Do you think I want to be stuck here for the rest of my life, slave to *his* whims?"

"You won't be!" Thor cried. "I'll be here to protect you-

"Because you've done so well at that," Loki's voice was rising. "As when you protected me from Thanos - oh, wait! I can't *believe* you-

But apparently Loki had strained his throat too much, because he started coughing again. Thor lurched toward him and Loki wheezed, "don't touch me."

Anger and hurt and guilt were all twisted together in Thor's chest. He stared unhappily at Loki as he got the fit under control, sinking down to sit on the floor with his back to the wall. One of his eyes had started to return to a more normal color, but not the other.

"I need you," Thor said, when he thought he could speak without raising his own voice. "Loki, I - so much is gone. Is *lost*. You are the one piece of home that is left. I know this is not...ideal."

Loki squeezed his eyes closed. "*Not ideal*," he echoed, voice thick with scorn.

"But..." Thor swallowed hard. "You are my brother, Loki."

“Your brother,” Loki said flatly, “whom you bartered to an immortal who sees people as pieces in his great game.”

“I didn’t *barter* you!” Thor’s chest burned. It wasn’t supposed to be *like* this. “Do you wish I hadn’t brought you back?” The moment he asked it, he realized why he’d avoided asking: because he was afraid the answer would be yes.

But Loki slumped. “Before you did it, yes,” he murmured, and Thor just kept himself from wincing. “Now...I’m not particularly keen on dying *again*, I suppose.”

It wasn’t much. Thor would take it. He had to.

He moved over toward Loki, and when he didn’t pull away embraced him, though gently - not hard and desperate as he wanted to. He almost feared to break him. Thor felt Loki inhale, his ribs expanding, and then sigh.

“You great idiot,” Loki said, sounding resigned.

“So you have been calling me for centuries,” Thor said, not letting go. He was never letting go again. “I *am* going to protect you. I know...*I know* you don’t want to be here. I’d rather you weren’t, either. But it need not be...you managed here before, and now you won’t be on your own.”

“Nor am I going to stay here,” Loki said. “As soon as I find a way out, I’m - *we’re* leaving. Whatever you might have promised, I didn’t.”

“Oh, dear,” said the Grandmaster’s voice, and Thor felt Loki’s body go rigid. “That *hurts*. That you’d want to run off like that, after I-? Wow, that’s-”

“He didn’t mean it,” Thor said quickly, before Loki could speak, suddenly deathly afraid of what the Grandmaster might do if he thought Loki was going against his wishes.

“That’s good,” the Grandmaster said. “Because you’d, ah...have a bit of a problem. Namely that you’d sort of...die. Again.”

Thor’s breathing snagged, a frisson of fear running through him like a bolt of his own lightning. Loki pulled away from Thor and he let him, just far enough that he could turn.

“Convenient,” he said, voice flat. The Grandmaster shrugged.

“Just the way it works, sweetheart.” He smiled, dazzlingly. “Now, you two’ve had your touching reunion. Lo-lo, can I...borrow you for a sec? I think we should have a little, uh...talk about some things.”

Now it was Thor’s turn to stiffen. “I’ll stay.”

“This is a *private* conversation, Sparkles,” the Grandmaster said. “Go on. Take a little walk. Don’t get - don’t get *possessive* on me.”

“I’m not-”

“Thor,” Loki said lowly, his eyes fixed on the Grandmaster. “I think you should go.”

Thor turned to stare at him, almost *hurt*. “What?”

“I’ll come find you,” Loki said. “But I think I’d rather...speak with him alone.”

“Well? There you have it,” The Grandmaster said. He made a little shooing gesture. “Have fun. Maybe get a drink? You seem pretty...tense.”

Thor didn't want to leave. He didn't want to let Loki out of his sight.

But he didn't dare try to argue with the Grandmaster too much, either.

“All right,” he said slowly. “I'll...but I won't be far.”

He left, though almost immediately turned to press his ear to the door. He couldn't hear anything through it, though.

Thor wondered who he should ask about a place to stay. A *shared* place, so Loki would be close by. It occurred to him briefly that Loki might *want* his own space, but he brushed the thought aside. He'd recognize that it would be better to stay close together. It was safer.

It wasn't just that Thor didn't think he'd be able to sleep if he didn't know that Loki was there, close enough to reach in seconds. At least until Thor stopped seeing him die every time he closed his eyes.

When Loki found Thor after his talk with the Grandmaster, he was in an extremely poor mood. He did look like he'd gotten to wash, though, to Thor's relief. His hair was damp and he was no longer smudged with the dust and dirt he'd been covered in at the moment of his death. He was wearing different clothes, too, though they didn't look like his. Thor supposed they must have been provided by the Grandmaster.

“Don't talk to me,” he snapped at Thor, when he opened his mouth. “I am not in the mood.”

“What happened?” He asked gingerly.

“I thought I said *not* to talk to me.” Loki exhaled loudly. “He just wanted to *catch up*. And inform me that he's willing to forgive my previous transgressions so long as I *behave*.”

Thor did not think that quite explained Loki's mood, although maybe it did. The ‘being told to behave’ might well have done it on its own. “Is there anything you would like to do?”

“Sleep,” Loki said bluntly, and rubbed his eyes. He did, Thor realized, look exhausted. The bruising on his throat had faded but was still visible, and Thor realized he was staring at it again, his stomach clenching.

The sound of Loki choking. His dull eyes.

“What?” Loki said, and then seemed to realize what Thor was looking at and drew a sharp breath. “Stop that,” he said.

Thor shook his head. “Does it...does it hurt?”

Loki's hand drifted up toward his neck and then pulled quickly away. “Not like it did when it happened,” he said, voice caustic. It didn't quite succeed at hiding the slight tremor.

Thor swallowed hard. “It looks...”

“I'll wear a scarf, if you're going to stare,” Loki said tightly.

“That's not - you don't need to do that.”

Loki's chin lifted, which just made the bruising more obvious. "I don't exactly *enjoy* you looking at me like you're going to be sick."

"I'm not going to be sick," Thor took a deep breath. "Seeing...watching what he did to you was among the worst moments of my life."

"It ranks fairly high in my memory as well," Loki said, his voice still dry. Anger flashed.

"How can you be *flippant* about this?"

"What else am I supposed to be?" Loki demanded, voice rising. "A couple hours ago I was in *Valhalla*, at Frigga's side. And now I am *here*. I am a defacto prisoner on a planet made of trash. My body feels as though the universe chewed me up and spat me back out, which I suppose after a fashion it did. And my throat aches. Either I am *flippant* or I start screaming and don't stop. Which would *you* rather?"

Thor flinched. His chest ached again as he imagined Loki sitting at Frigga's side, the two of them smiling, laughing together.

Selfish, said Valkyrie's voice. Shame and guilt washed through him.

"I didn't want..." Thor trailed off. "I just wanted you back, Loki."

Loki sighed, glancing away. "I know."

"I went - a little mad."

Loki glanced at him through his eyelashes, like he didn't quite want to look at Thor directly. "The fact that you came *here* to ask for *his* help attests to that."

Thor tried to smile, though he was sure it didn't really look like one. "I had to pry it out of Brunnhilde. Valkyrie."

"Ah," Loki said. "So she *does* have a name. And survived. Good for her."

"She survived." Thor took a step toward Loki. "Do you...want anything? Something to eat? Who do we ask about where we're staying?"

Loki's eyebrows twitched up. "We?"

Thor faltered. "I assumed that...I'd like us to stay close. I know that this place is dangerous." *And you're...not well*. For all Loki was putting a brave face on it, Thor could see the traces in him. The tension in his posture, the flicker of his eyes toward doors and windows. The slight tremors that periodically shook him. He braced himself to argue, but after a hesitation Loki nodded.

"The Grandmaster already - *kindly* offered me a suite. But I will...ask for one with two bedrooms."

One, Thor was tempted to say. *One bedroom, so I can wake and hear you breathing*, but he held his tongue and made himself nod. "I can ask, if you'd sooner."

"No," Loki said slowly. "I think it's better if it comes from me." He glanced at Stormbreaker, resting against the wall, and nodded at it. "I see Eitri finished it, if belatedly. Though the handle looks a little odd."

Thor blinked. "What?"

“Your axe,” Loki said. “I - well, ‘Odin’ - sent the commission a while ago. Mjolnir was a mighty weapon, but I thought you might need something sharper.”

Thor stared at him. Oddly, his eyes stung. He remembered the mold - the mold that had already been there when he’d arrived looking for a weapon.

“He hadn’t finished it,” Thor said. “Thanos had attacked, and destroyed his hands. I helped him forge it. The handle was...a gift from a friend.”

Loki’s lips flickered, very slightly. “It suits you.”

He’d gone looking for a weapon to avenge Asgard, and Loki, and found the weapon Loki had meant for him. Thor wished he had known. Though maybe then it would have hurt too much.

“I didn’t know you’d commissioned it,” Thor said. Oddly enough, Loki seemed embarrassed.

“I am just...glad it found its way to you.”

And it brought me here to bring you back. Thor told himself it was something like fate. That he’d done exactly what he was supposed to do. That Loki wasn’t meant to be dead.

That he’d made the right choice.

They were installed in a suite with two bedrooms, spacious and comfortable. Thor eyed it almost suspiciously, though he couldn’t help but look at the sunken pool in the floor, steam rising off the surface, with anticipation.

Loki made a beeline for one of the bedrooms. Thor let him go, deciding that he deserved rest. For himself, he stripped down and sank into the pool, exhaling slowly.

He’d done it.

That hadn’t really hit Thor until just now. Not really. Caught up in the immediate emotions, in Loki’s reaction, in everything else, he hadn’t really absorbed that he’d *done* it. He’d come here to bring Loki back, and here he was. Alive.

A smile spread across Thor’s face. There’d been a price, of course, but - it was fine. They were here together. And Loki was *back*. That was all that mattered.

He sunk down into the water, letting the tension - the *grief* - that he’d been carrying since the Statesman ease, eyes drifting closed. All was not well, but one great wrong had been righted today.

Loki slept for maybe an hour and a half before he woke up screaming.

Thor had been inspecting the cooler in one corner, wondering if he dared drink anything in it, and before he was even thinking about it he had Stormbreaker in hand and was charging into Loki’s room, every alarm going off at once. But there was no attacker, no intruder: just Loki, twitching, his scream cutting off into a strangled choking sound-

Stormbreaker fell from Thor’s suddenly nerveless fingers and he stumbled to the bedside, grabbing Loki to shake him free of his nightmare. Loki’s fist hit him square in the nose, and his other slammed into Thor’s short ribs in a way that made Thor think there should have been a knife involved.

He stumbled back with a shout, shaking off the pain. *You didn’t think that through*, he thought

ruefully, but Loki was awake now, eyes wide and breathing in ragged, uneven, gasps. For several seconds he stared at Thor without recognition, but then his eyes clarified and he seemed to focus. Thor exhaled a breath he hadn't realized he was holding.

"Loki," he said lowly. "It was only a dream."

"I know, you idiot," Loki snapped, but there was a rough edge on his voice that belied the sharpness of the words. He ran his fingers through his hair, pushing it back out of his face. He glanced down at his right hand and flexed his fingers, eyebrows pulling slightly together. "Did I stab you?"

"No," Thor said, trying to dredge up a smile though his heart was still racing. "Not this time."

Loki stared at his hand a moment longer and then visibly shook himself. "Lucky you."

Thor hesitated, realizing that Loki must have tried to summon one of his knives. And failed. That was...concerning - was there something wrong with Loki's magic? - but he decided it was probably better not to press on that now.

He walked over to the bed instead and sat down. Loki stared at him, looking briefly hunted. "What?"

"I just..." Thor didn't think Loki would want to hear *I panicked when you screamed, and I don't want to leave you alone, I'm afraid*. "I thought something bad had happened."

"I'm fine," Loki said, though mechanically, unconvincingly. Thor couldn't tell if the shadows on his neck were just shadows or still bruises that should have healed by now. (What if they didn't? What if the Grandmaster was lying and Loki would bear the marks of his death forever?)

Thor slammed the door on that thought. "Yes," Thor said. "You *didn't* just wake up from a nightmare and try to stab me. My mistake."

Loki gave him a flat, unhappy, stare. "What do you want me to say?" He asked. "Do you want me to tell you that I remember every damned *second* of Thanos killing me? That I know now what it feels like when your own neck snaps?"

Thor's stomach heaved and he swallowed hard. "If that's what you need to say," he made himself say, "then yes."

Loki looked away, jaw working. His arms folded around himself like he was cold, though Loki didn't get cold. "Not everything needs to be said."

"If it helps you to speak of it-"

"It doesn't," Loki interrupted. His shoulders were drawn up, and his breathing sounded harsh, a little too fast. "Leave it, Thor."

He looked down, unhappily. It felt as though there was more he should do. More he should *try*. But he was afraid of pushing too hard, or in the wrong direction. Whatever Loki said, he was fragile - visibly so. Thor did not want to cost him his sanity by saying the wrong thing.

"So much for a revolution," he said, finally. "This place doesn't seem to have changed at all."

"Of course it hasn't," Loki said, his voice dull. "You've seen what the Grandmaster can do. I doubt this place will *ever* change, as long as he's entertained." Loki glanced at Thor sideways. "If it's all

the same to you, I'd rather not discuss him, either."

That was probably wise. He didn't want to set off Loki's temper again.

At least touch...maybe that was less dangerous than words. Thor reached out, thinking initially of claspings the back of Loki's neck only to check himself and change it to a hand on his shoulder. Loki shuddered slightly but didn't move to swat Thor's hand away.

"It's going to be all right," Thor said, and hoped that he sounded certain, and not just desperate for it to be true. "We will...together, we can deal with Sakaar, and the Grandmaster."

Loki made a noise in the back of his throat. "You say that now."

"You did before, didn't you?" Thor reminded him again. "What's so different now?"

"Nothing," Loki said, after a hesitation that made Thor think there was something Loki wasn't saying. "I'd say the fact that he effectively owns me, but I suppose that wasn't so far from the truth before. He owns everything on this planet."

Thor bristled, frowning. "He doesn't *own* you."

"I said 'effectively.'" Loki just sounded tired, though, rather than angry. He slumped back against the pillows. "You heard him. If I leave, I die. I don't think that little clause was an accident, do you? No, that's - insurance against property loss."

Heat welled up in Thor's chest. He knew what Loki was saying, and he could see the truth in it, and he *hated* it. And hated even more that he didn't dare confront the Grandmaster about it, for fear that he would take back what he'd done.

He looked away. "I won't let him treat you like - that."

Loki opened his mouth, then closed it with a sigh and pressed the heels of his hands into his eyes. "I'm sure."

"You don't believe me," Thor said. He could hear the faintly desperate edge in his own voice, and was ashamed, but - he couldn't let Loki think he wouldn't take care of him.

He could still hear the Grandmaster's casual accusation, and even if he *knew* it hadn't been his fault...

That didn't make the guilt easier to bear.

"I believe you." Loki gave Thor a tired look. "I'm exhausted, Thor. Let me rest."

"Will you?" Thor asked, before he could think better of it. Loki tensed.

"What are you going to do if I say no?"

"I could stay here," Thor said. "Just to...keep watch. And wake you if anything should happen."

"You mean if I start howling like a demon again?" Thor knew better than to take that bait. He stayed silent, and the tension went suddenly out of Loki's body. "Do as you like," he said, weary once again. "I can hardly stop you."

"You can ask me to leave."

“Would you?” Loki’s hands twisted together in an anxious gesture as familiar as breathing. “If I asked you to walk away, would you?”

Thor hesitated. “Are you asking?”

Loki was quiet for several long moments, and Thor’s chest tightened. What if Loki *did* ask him to leave? And not just leave this room, but leave here, this planet? *Would* he? Would he ask, out of some need to prove that he did not need Thor’s help?

“No,” Loki said after a long moment. “You can stay, if you want.” He laid back down and rolled to his side so his back was to Thor, curled a little into himself. Thor tried not to sigh too loudly, walking over to pick Stormbreaker up from where he’d dropped it and lean it against one of the walls. There was no chair to sit on, so instead he sat down gingerly on the side of the bed, half waiting for Loki to object.

He didn’t, though neither did he move over to make more room. Thor swung his legs up anyway, sitting with his back against the headboard and his legs stretched out, one eye on Loki and the other on the door.

Thor almost dozed off several times, but each time managed to jerk himself awake. Loki didn’t scream again, though a few times he whimpered and twisted, turning his face toward the bed like he was trying to hide in it.

Somewhere else, Thor could hear the low beat of music - a party, somewhere in this tower. He wondered, vaguely, if the Grandmaster knew of anything to ward off nightmares.

He didn’t think Loki would want him to ask, and he doubted either of them wanted to be further in the man’s debt.

“I’m alive,” was the first thing Loki said on waking up. Thor gave him an uncertain look.

“Yes?”

“I thought I’d dreamed that bit.” Loki rubbed his eyes. Thor frowned.

“Did you...dream, in Valhalla?”

“No,” Loki said, and then paused. “I’m...not certain. It’s blurry.” Panic flickered across his features. “My memories-”

“That makes sense, doesn’t it?” Thor interrupted, hoping to head off what he recognized as burgeoning panic. “Valhalla is a place of the dead, not the living. Since you’re not...not dead...”

“I don’t want to lose my memories,” Loki snapped over him, suddenly tense enough he was almost vibrating. Thor blinked, and Loki sat up, glaring at him. “*Mother* was there. We spoke. We talked about-” He faltered, uncertainty and then grief flashing across his face.

His expressions were so...*naked*, It was more than a little unnerving, even if it was useful. It wasn’t right for *Loki*. “You will return someday,” Thor said. “In many, many years.” *Together, the two of us*. “She will be there then.”

“Will I?” Loki said, his voice turning caustic. “It was a bit of a surprise I was allowed to enter *this* time.”

Thor stared at him. “A...” He broke off, seeking words, but Loki was already waving a hand in dismissal.

“It doesn’t matter now,” he said, though Thor could see clearly enough that it *did* matter and he just didn’t want to discuss it. “The Grandmaster is expecting us at today’s games. Don’t look so horrified,” he added, before Thor could say anything. “He said it would be ‘disappointingly bloodless’.”

That was some relief. Thor didn’t know what he would’ve done if the Grandmaster had still been having his slaves kill each other. (*Probably nothing, you coward.*) “Do you want to go?” He asked. Loki gave him an odd look.

“It wasn’t actually a question. Your attendance is probably optional. Mine almost certainly isn’t.”

“Not-” Thor frowned. “You *have* to go?”

“I’d expect so, yes. The Grandmaster doesn’t make *requests*.”

“What was that about me?”

Thor whipped around. He hadn’t heard anyone come in, hadn’t heard the door open, and *certainly* hadn’t heard a knock. But there Sakaar’s master was, in the same sparkly gold robe and slippers he seemed to favor. Smiling.

Thor was struck by the nearly irresistible urge to punch him. He reined it in and glanced at Loki, who just looked resigned.

“Nothing of interest, Grandmaster,” Loki murmured. The Grandmaster frowned at him.

“Sounding a little - goodness, perk up! Let’s see a little more *energy*, am I right?” He glanced at Thor, as if for agreement. Thor tried not to frown.

“I think it’s understandable for him to be tired,” he said, trying not to sound like he was arguing. The Grandmaster blinked at him like he was surprised.

“Is it? Are you - are you tired, Lo?”

“No,” Loki said, a little too quickly. “I’m fine.”

“Because I could get you a little pick me up, if you needed. Just a little - something to help you feel a bit more...”

“Thank you,” Loki said, “but that’s...not necessary.” There was just a hint of a nervous thrum in his voice, and Thor glanced at him. He hadn’t seen it before, but Loki seemed almost...skittish. It wasn’t just dislike, or distaste. He studied Loki a little more closely and noticed the slight shift in posture toward something almost deferential. Like the way he’d said the Grandmaster’s title.

Slave to his whims, Loki had said, and Thor had assumed that was a new state of affairs, but Loki seemed a little too familiar with donning this mask.

Unconsciously, he moved a little closer to his brother.

“Well, kitten, you let me know if you change your mind.” The indulgent smile he gave Loki made Thor itch, not to mention - *kitten*?

Loki didn’t even twitch at being so named. Smiled, in fact, and it looked horrifyingly real.

“Certainly.”

“Well, go on, then,” the Grandmaster said, with a little wave of his hand. “Take a bath, get all polished up - Sparkles and I will wait for you here.”

Loki gave Thor a look he couldn’t read, and then said, “I’ll be quick. I wouldn’t want to keep you waiting.”

“No! Take your time,” the Grandmaster said with that grin of his. “We can keep ourselves entertained.”

Loki hesitated, but turned and retreated into the washroom. Thor watched him go, frowning.

“You know,” the Grandmaster said, “I’m really - I’m actually *glad* it worked out this way. It’s nice, having Lo back around. He might be a troublemaker but he’s so much *fun*.”

Thor eyed him sideways. “That’s...good,” he said, carefully.

“Mm, yes. I wouldn’t normally be so quick to let things go - that whole ‘helping you steal off with my champion’ thing - but...I really did like him. Such a good sport.”

The back of Thor’s neck prickled. “Huh,” he said.

“Always game for anything,” the Grandmaster said with a reminiscent smile. “A *delight* at parties.” He hummed. “Do you know that - oh, well, I guess you wouldn’t. Brothers, right? Unless that’s - a *thing*, on Assburg, I know some families are...ah, about that.”

No, Thor thought. *He can’t be serious*. He glanced toward the closed bathroom door.

“You don’t mind, do you?” The Grandmaster said cheerfully. “I mean. Not that it’d particularly *matter* if you did, but...I don’t want any misunderstandings. That’d be...terrible. I figured we’ll just, you know, pick up where we left off. I’ll forgive anything - well, a lot of things - for a pretty face.” His smile looked like a leer. Thor’s chest tightened.

A slave to his whims.

“He’ll probably take some coaxing,” the Grandmaster said. “Skittish little thing, he is. And I guess dying won’t help that. But...”

Thor’s stupefaction evaporated and anger flooded in. He wanted to beat the Grandmaster into the floor. Cut off his head with Stormbreaker. Strike him down with lightning.

His hands clenched into fists. *If he dies, what happens to Loki? Could I kill him? And if I fail...*

“Anyway,” the Grandmaster said, and smiled at Thor. His eyes glittered, his expression almost unbearably smug. “You *don’t* mind. Do you?”

Thor’s jaw tightened. Before he could figure out what to say that wouldn’t involve shouting, the Grandmaster kept going. “Because, well...I’m *going* to...get on that. Him. Back on him.” His eyebrows rose with a little smirk. “I mean. We want to make sure everything *works*, right?”

His breathing had started to come hard and fast, and there was a faint fog trying to take over his vision. Thor took a deep breath. “I don’t think now’s exactly the time,” he made himself say, through his teeth. “Considering...considering.”

“Considering he was dead?” The Grandmaster waved a hand. “Eh.”

Thor bit his tongue, hard. Imagined ripping the Grandmaster's head off his shoulders with his bare hands. *If you touch him I'll...*

But he couldn't make any threats. None whatsoever. *Some protector you are.*

"Looking a little unhappy there, Sparkles," the Grandmaster said cheerfully.

Thor's nails dug into the palm of his hand. "I am just worried about Loki. He's not..." Loki would hate him for this. "He's not at his best."

"Oh, I know! Trust me, I can...I can *tell*. But he'll get better. Don't *worry* so much, Sparkles. Goodness. You're...a little protective, aren't you?"

"He's my younger brother," Thor said stiffly.

"I've got a younger brother," the Grandmaster said. "You don't see me fussing over him. Though - maybe he's older. I can't remember, it's been a while. I'm just *saying*, Sparkles, it...didn't anyone ever teach you to share?"

Thor trembled with the effort of holding still. "Don't you dare touch him," he burst out, before he could stop himself, and then felt a wave of terror. The Grandmaster's eyebrows rose.

"Wow," he said. "That's - wow, sounding a little aggressive there. We're not going to have a problem, are we?"

Thor glanced toward the bathroom door. His nails dug into the palms of his hands. "No," he made himself say. "There is no problem."

"Good," the Grandmaster said pleasantly. "I'm glad to hear it." He patted Thor on the shoulder. "I knew you'd be understanding."

Thor took a slow, unsteady breath and let it out. *Pick up where we left off*. It wasn't like he hadn't noticed there was - *something*, there, at least in the way the Grandmaster looked at Loki, but he'd assumed that Loki wouldn't be interested.

Of course, it was possible that *Loki's* interests weren't relevant.

Somehow, he was going to find a way to get Loki away from this planet.

The door opened and Loki emerged with still-damp hair before Thor could figure out anything more to say. He stopped, looking back and forth between them, and the little color in his face drained out of it.

"What did you say to him," Loki said to the Grandmaster. Not asking Thor, which - if he'd had any doubts, there they went.

"The truth and nothing but the truth, sweetheart," the Grandmaster said. Loki's jaw tightened and relaxed.

"That wasn't necessary," he said, voice audibly strained.

"How many times do I have to tell you," the Grandmaster said, "I'm not about *necessary*. Well, come on! Enough waiting around, the two of you need to just - lighten *up*, I swear, so dreary. It's okay, though, we'll get you sorted."

Thor looked at Loki, who was plainly avoiding his eyes. *So not only do you drag his soul out of*

Valhalla and force him back into a damaged body, haunted by nightmares, murmured a nasty voice that sounded like Brunnhilde's, you've also chained him to an immortal, sexually depraved, madman.

What made him feel more guilty than any of that, though, was the fact that he didn't feel guiltier.

Chapter 2

Chapter Notes

Warnings this chapter for references to past non/dubcon, some minor (i.e. non-explicit) dubcon later in the chapter.

Sakaar was both dazzling, unnerving, and peculiarly dull. Or perhaps it was just that the entertainment wasn't to Thor's taste. The gladiatorial matches remained intact, though substantially thinner than before: reliant on volunteers, apparently, and not to the death.

So there was that, at least, though the Grandmaster seemed to find this development mildly irritating.

"We've made some changes," the Grandmaster informed him. "It's, uh, unfortunate, but...I think we'll be able to figure out something better sooner rather than later, but for now...well. People get so *fussy*, you know."

"I can't imagine why," Thor said. Loki shot him a look of alarm, and the Grandmaster frowned at him. Thor shook himself and forced a smile. "Everything seemed fine as it was," he lied, well aware it was obvious and hoping that mouthing the words was enough. Even if it made him a little sick to say them.

This entire place was rotten to its core. And now it was Loki's home.

Loki, who was not recovering as well as Thor would like.

The bruising faded quickly enough, to his relief, but he still slept poorly, and Thor had not seen him use any of his magic. He was often tired, though he tried to hide as much, and his moods swung wildly from testy and snappish to black depression to taciturn and sullen. And Thor's attempts to draw him out more often than not ended in failure.

At least he let Thor hold him when he was shaking in the aftermath of a nightmare, gasping for air like he couldn't get enough and making Thor's own lungs constrict in sympathy.

"I hate this," Loki said, something sharp-edged and vicious audible even in his muffled voice. "This, this *weakness*."

"It isn't weakness," Thor protested. *You did not see me after. You did not see how your death tore me apart.*

"Isn't it?" Loki moved to pull back, but Thor did not let him go.

"No," he said. "It isn't. You were - you were wounded."

"I was *dead*," Loki said, his voice harsh, and Thor fought not to flinch. "And now I am here. Does that - does that not strike you as *wrong*?"

"No," Thor said loudly. "It was wrong that you were murdered. It was wrong when you were not here." *With me. When I was alone.*

Loki said nothing, but Thor did not think he was convinced.

And Loki's lingering malaise was not the only problem.

It was perhaps a week before Thor realized what he hadn't really considered: namely, the fact that he was going to have to return to Earth eventually. He was not much of a ruler, but he was still their ruler; he had responsibilities to them as well. They might be transitioning out of a monarchy (necessary, Thor thought, and found he could not truly mind the thought of being Asgard's last king), but they still needed his guidance for now - or at least his *presence*. He couldn't just vanish like he had. And while given the strangeness of how time passed here, he didn't actually know how long it might have been...

He would still need to go back. And return, of course, but he *would* be leaving. Leaving Loki, who still hadn't slept a night through, who flinched from sudden movements, who seemed, despite his moodiness and bluster, as loathe to let Thor out of his sight as Thor was to let Loki out of his.

Later, Thor kept telling himself. *Later, later*. He didn't want to leave.

And he didn't know how to tell Loki that he needed to.

Unfortunately, for all Loki was - distracted, he was still all too good at reading Thor.

"What is it," he asked, something tense and anxious already in his voice.

"What?" Thor said, almost relieved for the distraction from what was some truly awful theater. That relief evaporated when he saw the look on Loki's face.

"Something is troubling you," Loki said. "Has been troubling you. There's something you don't want to tell me." His throat bobbed as he swallowed, his hands pressed flat on his thighs like he was trying not to fidget. "I am tired of trying to guess."

"It's nothing," Thor tried. Loki's expression spasmed.

"Don't insult me," he said. Thor looked down at the stage.

"This really is awful," he said.

"Don't try to change the subject, either." The tension in Loki's voice was only increasing. "Just tell me."

"Not here," Thor said. "Later. In private."

"Then let's go somewhere private," Loki said, starting to stand. Thor grabbed his wrist, too quick and too hard, and Loki froze, his eyes briefly going a little wild. Thor let go quickly and said, "we'd better not," glancing up toward the Grandmaster's box. Loki's lips twisted but he sank back down.

"Is it something to do with him," he said, sitting stiffly and not looking at Thor.

"No," Thor said carefully.

"Is it something to do with *me*?"

"I said *later*," Thor said more loudly. Loki's shoulders drew up.

"Are you leaving?"

Thor didn't lie fast enough. Hesitated over lying, really, and he knew the moment he hesitated that it was too late, and he wanted to curse. Loki was quiet, and Thor glanced at him nervously.

"I see," Loki said. His voice sounded strange.

"I didn't say-"

"If you'll excuse me," Loki interrupted, and stood up again, sidestepping neatly out of Thor's reach and walking out. Thor jumped to his feet and hurried after him.

"Loki, wait," he called to his brother's retreating back, but Loki didn't so much as pause. "Loki-" His brother sped up, and Thor sped up too, lengthening his stride. "Loki, *stop*."

He didn't respond to that, either. Of course he didn't. "Please," Thor added hopefully, but Loki raised a hand and twisted it and vanished from sight. Thor stumbled to a halt and swore loudly in three different languages.

"Loki!" He called, like that would get him to rematerialize, but he didn't. Thor slumped. This was, he realized, the first time he'd seen Loki use any magic - that ought to be a relief, but under the circumstances it really wasn't.

He'd feared a fight. He'd forgotten that with Loki it could be worse: namely silence and avoidance.

Thor went back to their rooms in the hopes that Loki would come there eventually, and paced back and forth. He should have mentioned this days ago. *Coward*, he thought angrily.

Loki didn't come back for almost two hours. Thor could feel himself rapidly spiraling into near panicked worry, imagining all the things that could have gone wrong, but when Loki walked in, fully visible, other than the blank mask of his face he did not seem any worse for wear than when he'd abandoned Thor at the play.

"Where have you *been*," Thor blurted out.

"About," Loki said. "When were you planning to tell me that you were leaving?"

"I - soon," Thor said.

"How long have you known you were going to?"

Lie, Thor thought, but he sighed and said, "a few days." He saw the barest twitch in Loki's jaw before his face was a still mask once more.

"You're going back to Midgard?" It wasn't a question. Thor nodded, and Loki nodded as well. Thor wondered if Loki thought he couldn't see the tension that was almost making Loki vibrate where he stood.

"It won't be for long," Thor said. "Just a brief visit to ensure that all is well. I'll tell Brunnhilde what's going on - that you're alive. If you'd like me to bring any message from you-"

"I did wonder," Loki said. His voice was quiet, but something about the tone cut through Thor's sentence, and he thought *oh no*.

"Wonder what," Thor said carefully, when Loki didn't go on. Knowing he was taking dangerous bait, but he needed to keep Loki talking if he wanted to figure out what he was thinking.

"Whether you were *really* intending to stay here for the rest of your days." He let out a laugh,

brittle and too bright. “Stupid of me.”

“It isn’t like that,” Thor protested. “I have to go back-”

“I know,” Loki said. “I understand.”

Thor shook his head. “I don’t think you do. You’re acting like - like I’m *abandoning* you. I’m going to come back, as soon as I can.”

“But you have no idea when that will be,” Loki said, his voice still flat and toneless. “And I imagine this won’t be the last time. You’ll have to leave again. And again. Back and forth, and I will wait here for you, of course, ever so patiently.”

“I don’t know that anyone has ever accused you of patience,” Thor said, trying to lighten the mood. By the look on Loki’s face, it didn’t work. “I don’t like this either,” Thor tried, and Loki’s mask broke.

“*You* don’t like it?” He hissed. “You’re the one with the *choice*, Thor. You *can* leave. I can’t. You chose to bring me back, and trap me here, and now you’re walking away. But what’s the harm? At least you’ll know I’ll be here when you get back, since I can’t go anywhere else-”

“Loki,” Thor said tensely, “Don’t you think you’re being a little-”

“A little what,” Loki hissed. “Unreasonable?” He took a step toward Thor, almost vibrating with now-obvious anger. “Is that what you were going to say?”

“No,” Thor lied. “I know I should have told you before now, but-” *I didn’t want to*. That was not a particularly convincing excuse.

“Am I your pet, then?” Loki said, breathing hard and fast. “To be left behind at your whim? Or - no - I’m *his*, and he just loans me to you at your convenience. Either way, yours or his, to be passed back and forth between you until one of you tires of me!”

Thor felt like he’d been punched. The anger hit a moment later, hot and defensive. “How *dare* you,” he said. “How dare you act like - I’m setting *everything* aside to be here, with you! I’ve put the rest of my life on hold for this - for *you*!”

“No need to make such sacrifice on *my* account,” Loki sneered. “You got what you wanted. I’m alive. Whatever guilt you feel, whatever *obligation*, consider it alleviated and go.”

“Why do you have to be *like* this!” Thor burst out. Loki smiled nastily.

“It’s in my nature.”

“Don’t be an ass,” Thor snapped.

“Be honest, Thor,” Loki said, his voice hard and sharp as a knife. “You don’t want *me*. You want your *good* brother, the one who exists in your grieving imagination, flaws wiped away. You want a brother when it’s *convenient* and otherwise - well, you have other things to do-”

“That isn’t true,” Thor said harshly.

“I don’t want you here,” Loki said, his voice rising over Thor’s. “I don’t *need* you here, Thor. So by all means, get out, and if it’s such a *burden* then don’t bother coming back!”

He swept past Thor, ripping his arm away from Thor’s attempt to grab hold of him, slammed

through the door to his bedroom, and closed it behind him with a bang. Thor strode over and grabbed the doorknob without thinking, but it didn't budge. He could break through it, grab Loki and shake him and try to make him understand—

Thor took a step back, then another, breathing in slowly. It wouldn't do either of them any good to pursue this argument. The best thing to do was just to...give Loki space to calm down.

Besides, Thor didn't think *he* could have any conversations with Loki right now without shouting. He felt vaguely as though he'd just been in a brawl. *I don't want you here. I don't need you here. Don't bother coming back.*

Maybe this was good timing for him to get away for a little while, Thor thought unhappily, the anger leaving so he just felt vaguely miserable. Give them both a little time.

Tomorrow, he told himself. Hopefully Loki would have calmed down enough by then to say goodbye.

Thor was still smarting from his argument with Loki when he left the next morning. Loki still had not showed his face.

Thor would have tried for some resolution, but Loki's door was closed and, when Thor tried the knob, locked. He'd be fine, Thor told himself. And he wasn't going to be gone long. Trying to press Loki now would probably just make things worse.

And what if something happens, whispered the fear that curdled in Thor's stomach as he imagined walking away. *What if something goes wrong and he dies because you weren't here?*

Maybe you should just stay.

He took a deep breath and made himself turn and walk away. "No more than a day," he murmured to himself. "I'll be right back."

The Bifrost leap from Sakaar to Midgard took longer than from Asgard to anywhere else. But he landed just the same, a short distance from the settlement. It looked as though it was just after sunrise.

Halfway there, Brunnhilde came barrelling out and almost charged into him. "You're alive," she said, sounding honestly surprised. Thor couldn't help but smile at her.

"I'm alive," he said. "And—"

"Oh, fuck," she said. "You did it, didn't you?"

Thor couldn't help it. He smiled. "I did it," he said. "Loki's alive."

"*Shit,*" Brunnhilde said, tone somewhere between awed and horrified. "*Shit,* Thor. Where is he?"

Thor felt his smile dim just a little. "Back on Sakaar."

"Back on Sakaar." Brunnhilde's voice flattened. "Is there a reason you didn't bring him back here with you?"

Here and there Asgardians were starting to emerge from their tents, drowsy and confused. Their eyes widened when they saw Thor and they stopped in their tracks, staring at him. Thor cleared his throat.

“Maybe we should talk about this somewhere private.”

“Maybe we should.” Brunnhilde’s voice was chilly. They retreated into her cabin, and almost as soon as Thor closed the door she rounded on him.

“How long has it been there,” she said.

“A week,” Thor said. Brunnhilde exhaled.

“It’s been about half a day, here,” she said. “The time dilation changes. So. You did it. You went to Sakaar, you asked Gast to bring your brother back from the dead.”

“And he did it,” Thor said, maybe a little defensively. “He brought Loki back to life.”

“What did he ask for in return?” Thor hesitated, and Brunnhilde took a step toward him. “*What did you give him, Thor?*”

Loki. I gave him Loki. Guilt stabbed through him. *Am I your pet, then? Yours, or his, to be traded back and forth between you until one of you tires of me.* He swallowed hard. “Loki...Loki has to stay on Sakaar.”

Brunnhilde stared at him. “Right,” she said. “Right. So. Do you know what that *means?*”

Thor swallowed hard. “I know.”

“So you know that your little brother is probably getting his ass railed by Gast as we’re standing here talking?”

A shiver of anger ran down Thor’s spine. His hands clenched into fists and for a moment he wanted to punch Brunnhilde for saying it, because he was trying not to think it, trying to believe that Loki could fend off the Grandmaster on his own. “He’s under my protection,” Thor said, like that mattered. Brunnhilde snorted, though her eyes were cold.

“You’re an idiot,” she said. “A royal fucking idiot.”

Thor stiffened. “Don’t be so quick to judge me,” he said harshly. “Just because I had the *guts* to do what you didn’t dare and actually *act* to bring back my loved one instead of hiding in a bottle.”

He knew he’d made a mistake the moment the words were out of his mouth. Brunnhilde stiffened, then hauled back and punched him in the solar plexus.

Thor wheezed, for a couple seconds unable to breathe. He straightened up, furious, but Brunnhilde was already in his face. “Fuck you, Your Majesty,” she said. “Don’t you *ever* act like I’m *less* than you because I didn’t make a deal with one of the universe’s biggest bastards. I’m not the coward here who wanted his brother back so bad that he didn’t care what it cost. And you’re not even the one paying.”

She turned on her heel and stalked away from him. Thor opened his mouth to shout after her, only to close it, his heart sinking.

He shouldn’t have said that. He knew it. He’d said it because somewhere deep in his gut he was afraid that she was right. That he’d condemned Loki to a hell because he was too selfish to let him go.

Thor looked up at the sky. He couldn’t - wouldn’t - stay here for long. He needed to get back to

Loki, and soon. Be there to watch his back and protect him. By the time he got back...Loki might not have forgiven him, but at least he might be willing to talk again, and Thor would apologize. Loki was not a rabbit to succumb so quickly to the Grandmaster's wolf. He was strong, and clever-

(And wounded, and vulnerable.)

Thor took a deep breath. He would just have to see to business here as efficiently as possible, and get back to Loki before anything went wrong.

Brunnhilde did not speak to him. He attempted to apologize, but she just stared at him, cold and hard, until he retreated.

He did not seek out his friends, or tell them what had happened. With Brunnhilde's reaction...he did not want to know what the mortals, who had no reason to love Loki, would think of what he'd done.

He meant to linger for only the space of a day, aware of how time must be slipping by more rapidly on Sakaar, but things kept coming up - one after another, matters that needed to be dealt with, and no matter how much he itched to be gone, he needed everything in order before he did. The more he had things arranged to run smoothly in his absence, the longer he could stay with Loki.

Finally, though, he managed to slip away. He paused by Brunnhilde's cabin and knocked on the door.

"I'm leaving," he said, when she opened it.

"Great," she said coldly. Thor took a deep breath and let it out.

"I don't want to part at odds," he said.

"Then you shouldn't have been an asshole," Brunnhilde said, but she sighed, lips twisting. "All right. You're still an asshole, but I'll forgive it. This time." She paused. "You'll...say hi to Loki for me. And..." Brunnhilde studied him. "I hope I'm wrong, Thor. I really hope I'm wrong."

"I hope you are too," Thor said, pulling up a strained smile before leaving her.

He kept his word, landing outside the Grandmaster's tower instead of inside it, and walked inside. Loki was not in their rooms, which was not entirely surprising; Thor left Stormbreaker behind and went looking.

He stumbled into the party by accident and found Loki almost immediately.

Loki, draped in unfamiliar clothing that left more skin bare than Thor had ever seen him show outside a bathhouse, lounging on a couch half on the lap of the being next to him, a glass of something blue and sparkling dangling from his fingers. Thor stared at him a moment, incredulous, and then pushed his way through the crowd, making a beeline for his brother.

"Loki," he said loudly, but Loki ignored him. His companion didn't, and whatever look was on Thor's face had him trying to scramble away. Loki grabbed his arm without looking.

"Don't - *don't* be like that," Loki said. There was an audible slur in his voice. "Thor, piss off. I'm busy."

"I can see that," Thor said, his voice dark and low. Loki tilted his head back, looking at Thor

upside down and smiling. His pupils had expanded to almost swallow the color, the muscles of his face slack.

“And you’re interrupting.”

“You’re drunk,” Thor said. Loki hummed.

“High, too. It’s marvelous. I’ve been - making myself at home, while you were away.” He smiled, but Thor could see the brittle edge in it. “So you see, you needn’t have come back at all.”

Thor sucked in a breath, and looked at Loki’s wide-eyed companion. “Leave,” he said.

“Don’t you dare,” Loki said breathlessly, but he’d already disentangled himself and scampered off. Loki turned a blurry-eyed glare on Thor. “That,” he slurred, “was unnecessary.”

“What are you doing,” Thor asked.

Loki laughed, the sound high and sharp. “Living - living the *high* life. In both...both senses of the word. Having just a - just a wonderful time.”

The worried anger was quickly giving way to just worry. “I think you should come with me back to our rooms.”

“Leave? Now? The night’s barely started,” Loki said, still grinning madly. “I’m still wearing all my clothes, for one.”

Thor’s stomach clenched. “It’s afternoon,” he said.

“All the more reason.” Loki raised his glass to his lips and tossed back the rest of it before Thor could take it from him. “So. Why don’t you go on back to Midgard and your friends. I’ll be just fine.” He stared at the now empty glass, and huffed. “I need another drink.”

“No,” Thor said firmly, “you don’t. And you’re not - *fine*. You’re barely *coherent*.”

“I’m perfectly coherent,” Loki said. “Listen to this: get fucked, Thor.”

Thor felt like he’d been punched in the gut. “You don’t mean that.”

“Don’t I?” Loki rose to his feet, swaying. “You *left* me. You *left* me here, like a dog at a kennel, while you went skipping off to Midgard, but that’s fine, that’s *fine* because I *belong* here, or at least I do now, so don’t judge me, you have *no idea*-”

Loki seemed to realize belatedly that his voice had risen to nearly a scream. He cut off, abruptly, staring at Thor with his shoulders heaving.

“Loki,” Thor said, his voice plaintive. His brother swayed again, and half-fell back onto the couch, the glass dropping to the floor as he covered his face with his hands.

“I didn’t think you were coming back,” he said, barely above a whisper. “I thought you were gone. I thought you’d left me here. I - I woke up and you were *gone* and I didn’t know - I thought I’d-”

Thor sat down next to him, and glared at the rest of the room until they at least pretended to stop staring. “Of course I was coming back.”

Loki made a wretched sound. “We fought. And then you were gone, without a word, and I thought...” He gulped, loudly, and Thor realized that he was weeping. He felt a pang in his chest.

"I'm sorry," Loki said, turning toward Thor and grabbing ahold of his shirt, looking at Thor with his drug-fogged eyes, face turning blotchy red. "I'm *sorry*, I was, don't leave me, Thor, don't *leave* me."

Guilt gnawed at Thor's guts. "I..." Thor looked around them. Most of the people were managing not to look like they were staring, but Thor knew they were watching. He thought of vultures, circling, looking for weakness, and wanted to fold Loki into his arms and turn his back like he could shield him.

He might not be able to do that, but he could at least get him out of here. "Come with me," he said, trying not to sound overly coaxing. "Let's go back to our room. I'll get you some water, you can lie down..."

Loki's fingers only clutched his shirt tighter. "Are you going to leave again?"

Thor's heart ached. "No," he said, trying to speak gently. "No, I'm...I'm here. We'll just go and...sit together. All right?" He hadn't seen Loki this incapacitated in centuries. Not since they were little more than boys. Loki did not get drunk. He actively avoided it. And he certainly had never indulged in anything else that Thor knew of.

Seeing Loki like this felt wrong in so many ways.

He managed to get Loki to his feet, a little helped by the fact that Loki wouldn't let go of him for even a second, though Thor had to hold him up to keep him standing. It was slow progress to the door, but he managed to get Loki out into the hallway.

"I'm sorry," Loki said again. "I shouldn't have said - those things. It was - *stupid*, I'm stupid-"

"Loki," Thor interrupted. "It's fine. I forgive you."

Loki was quiet for a moment, then made a strange gulping sound and started crying anew. Thor winced but kept going.

"I should have said something before leaving," he said. "I didn't mean to be gone this long. How..." He gulped, a little nervous. "How long has it been?"

"Two weeks," Loki said. Thor winced again. On the one hand, that was much longer than he'd expected. On the other hand...Loki had used to go months off traveling on his own without a word. It'd maddened Odin - it'd maddened *Thor*. But two weeks now, in this place, without Thor here...

Loki leaned heavily into him, still making muffled noises as he wept. "It's all right," Thor said awkwardly. "Loki, it's - it's all right, I'm here now."

That seemed to work, a little. Or at least, Loki quieted from sobbing to just crying silently.

Thor let out a sigh of relief when the door closed behind them, walking Loki over to one of the chairs and trying to ease him down into it. Loki went easily enough, too limp to fight, but when Thor started to pull away, his hand snapped out with startling quickness and grabbed his wrist.

"Thor," he said, his eyes widening.

"I'm not leaving," Thor said again, trying not to sound tired. "You need water."

"Water?" Loki said blankly. "I'm not thirsty."

"You should be," Thor said. "As drunk as you are."

"I don't feel very good," Loki said. His hand fell away from Thor's wrist and he swayed sideways, his skin gone ashy pale. Thor cast about for a basin, but all he found was an expensive looking vase. He rushed over and brought it back, but too late: Loki had already thrown up on himself.

Thor closed his eyes with a heavy sigh. "Oh, Loki," he said. Loki made another hiccuping sound.

"I'm sorry," he said. "Don't - don't tell the Grandmaster." *Why not*, Thor wanted to ask, but he didn't think now was the time. Later. He set the vase aside and walked back over to Loki.

"I won't," he said, trying to sound soothing. "Let's just...get you cleaned up." Loki stared up at him, wide-eyed and still sick-looking, and Thor reached down to pull him up to his feet. Loki stumbled, half-falling against him.

They made it to the bathroom, and Thor lowered Loki to sit on the floor next to the toilet while he ran the water, in the hopes that if he vomited maybe he'd aim.

"You shouldn't've - shouldn't've come back," he said, blurrily, and Thor jerked like Loki had slapped him.

"You don't mean that," he said. Loki shook his head.

"You...you deserve better. You shouldn't have to be - shackled to me-" Loki broke off and threw up again with a pathetic, unhappy, noise - fortunately, into the toilet. By the looks of what Thor could see, he hadn't had anything other than brightly colored alcohol in the last several hours. Thor squeezed his eyes closed.

"I'm not shackled to anyone," he said. "I *want* to be with you. I - I brought you *back*."

"I thought maybe you'd changed your mind," Loki said. "Or that you - you felt like you *had* to."

Thor's chest ached. He *knew* that there were good odds this was just - Loki's state talking, and not what he truly believed. But that he *could* believe it still stung. "No," Thor said. "I didn't change my mind." He checked the temperature of the water again and turned back to Loki. "Let's get those clothes off, all right? Then you can wash up, put on something clean, sleep the rest of this off-"

"I can't," Loki said. "I can't sleep, not without...*it* always happens."

Thor's stomach clenched. "I thought that'd gotten better-" Before he'd left. Thor closed his eyes. "Have you not slept for the last two weeks?"

"No," Loki said. "I did, just..." He trailed off and retched weakly. "Only when he helped."

Thor didn't need to ask who *he* was. He could picture it all too clearly: the Grandmaster making sympathetic noises, *oh, kitten, I can help with that*. His mind conjured up an image of Loki lying with his head on the Grandmaster's lap while the Grandmaster petted him like a cat and he almost choked on his anger.

"I'll - *I'll* help," Thor said. "I'll be right there."

To his relief, Loki did seem to find that reassuring. He started fumbling at his clothes and Thor watched him for a moment before sighing and helping undo some of buttons and clasps holding the scanty garments on him.

“You need water,” Thor said. “Can you get in the bath on your own?” He waited for Loki’s shaky nod before standing up and leaving the bathroom.

He paused, once he was sure he was out of Loki’s sight, and rubbed his face with his hands, squeezing his eyes closed. He would have cursed, but he was afraid that Loki would hear him.

You left him here, the guilt sneered. You left him here, without a word, when he was at his most vulnerable, and you’re going to be upset that he reacted poorly?

Thor rolled his shoulders back and found a glass in one of the cabinets, filling it with water from a pitcher by the window. He glanced toward Loki’s bedroom and wondered how many nights the Grandmaster had spent in it.

He took a deep breath through his nose, let it out, and went back in. Loki was in the bathtub, though he looked limp and pale enough that for a moment Thor thought he was unconscious. His eyes opened a sliver, though, when Thor came in.

“Drink this,” Thor said, holding out the water. Loki took it clumsily, his hand visibly shaking. Most of it ended up in the bathtub rather than in his mouth, but at least he drank some of it. Thor set the glass aside to try again later.

He was sobering, though slowly. Thor could tell by the way he turned his face away, the shame in his hunched shoulders, though his eyes when he glanced at Thor were still all pupil. Thor forced a smile.

“It’s all right,” he said again, like maybe this time Loki would hear it, and believe it.

“It isn’t,” Loki said, sinking further down into the water, “but that isn’t your fault. It’s not - none of it’s your fault.”

Thor sighed. “You are both more forgiving and more apologetic when you are drunk.”

“I was so scared,” Loki said, his voice blurry. “I woke up and - and you were gone. And all I could think was that you’d...you’d decided you didn’t want me anymore, and left. That it’d - that you thought it’d be better if you never saw me again.”

Thor could hear the echo of old words there, and wished, yet again, that Loki’s memory was *slightly* less precise for the worst possible things.

“That’s not it,” Thor said. “I was always going to come back. *I meant* to come back sooner. I will never - *never* - abandon you.”

Loki let out a broken sob. “Thank you,” he said, unbearably grateful. Thor held back another sigh and flushed the toilet before sitting down on it, watching Loki soak.

It was the first time he’d seen Loki naked since before everything had gone wrong, and he found himself cataloguing the differences. He looked skinnier again, like he’d lost weight since Thor had gone. For the most part, his skin was unmarked, all the marks of his death wiped away; the only one that remained was the thick scar down the center of his chest. Thor knew where it was from, could picture perfectly the moment of its creation.

He’d thought Loki must have somehow tricked him. The scar suggested otherwise, though he still didn’t understand how.

It didn’t really matter. Surely, Thor thought bitterly, three times must be enough for one man to

watch his brother die.

He realized slowly that Loki had fallen asleep. Or passed out, perhaps, but he was breathing clearly. Thor started the drain and lifted Loki out of the bath. He felt heavy and limp but Thor could feel his quiet exhalations on Thor's neck where Loki's head rested on his collarbone. He stirred a little when Thor set him down on his bed, blinking blearily at him.

"What's..."

"It's me," Thor said. "You fell asleep in the bath."

"Oh." Loki frowned slightly. "You're not...are you leaving?"

"No," Thor said. "I'm not leaving."

"Oh." Thor pulled the covers back up over him and Loki snuggled under them, his hair leaving a wet patch on the pillow. Thor thought about getting a towel and decided against it, just resting a hand on Loki's shoulder until he drifted off again.

Thor threw Loki's clothes down the laundry chute and washed his hands, then stood in the center of the room, staring at the sunken pool and feeling utterly exhausted.

You didn't think this would be easy, did you? Murmured a snide voice in Thor's head that sounded a little like Loki. He grimaced at nothing.

Tomorrow Loki would wake up sober - if probably miserable - and they could talk. Thor would be sure Loki understood that he wasn't going to leave. They'd discuss some of the hateful things Loki had said in their last argument. He would go back to keeping Loki safe and helping him heal.

Watching always with near constant fear that Loki was going to slip through his fingers again.

Thor laid down next to Loki where he would hear him if he woke during the night. He didn't mean to sleep, but he dropped off just the same.

He woke up to the sound of Loki retching.

Thor had fallen asleep in his leathers and felt decidedly uncomfortable for it; he hadn't taken the chance to change since returning. Rising, he went to fill a glass of water and brought it into the bathroom, where Loki was slumped over the toilet.

"Water?" He said. Loki moaned faintly.

"Thor?" He said, voice blurry, turning his head. His hair was falling in his face and he looked thoroughly wretched.

"Yes," he said, still holding out the water. "I returned-" He glanced at the window to check the time and found the sky dark. "This afternoon."

"Oh," Loki said after a moment. "I thought I'd hallucinated that."

Thor felt his expression spasm. "You didn't," he said after a moment, instead of asking *how many times did that happen?* Loki reached out after a moment and took the glass, swallowing it in three gulps.

"Oh," Loki said again. He sounded neither pleased nor angry: just exhausted and miserable. Thor

caught himself imagining how many mornings Loki might have woken up like this alone - or worse, with the Grandmaster there, holding his hair back. Murmuring comforting words.

He swallowed his anger and reached out to flush the toilet. "I didn't mean to be gone so long," he said. Loki looked at him sideways and said nothing, and Thor felt the strangest blend of frustration and despair. "Loki..."

He sighed, dropping his head forward. "It doesn't matter," he said hoarsely. "I can't pretend I'm not glad you're back."

Another time Thor might have joked that that was a lot of words for Loki to say that he was happy to see him. Just now...

"It seems you've been...while I was gone..." Thor searched for a delicate way to phrase it. Of course Loki didn't wait.

"Assimilating?" The bitter curve of his lips only lasted a moment before he pivoted back to the toilet, but though he hung over it for a moment he didn't start retching again.

"I wouldn't put it that way," Thor said. "I thought you were going to *avoid* the Grandmaster."

"Easier said than done. It's like avoiding a hurricane." Loki coughed weakly. "It seemed better to choose how to surrender. Particularly given..." He trailed off. Thor felt a bit ill. *Given that I assumed you weren't coming back.* Yes, that was clear enough.

He couldn't tell if Loki was *trying* to make him feel guilty or just managing it without effort. He *did* know that he couldn't just keep apologizing forever.

"What can I do," he said, at length. Loki closed his eyes and sighed.

"I don't know, Thor."

That was somehow worse than the vitriol Loki had flung at him before, or the tears. Thor's heart sank. After a long moment he came and sat on the floor with Loki.

"Brunnhilde says hello," he said. Loki opened his eyes and glanced at Thor.

"She did?"

"Yes," Thor said. "She was not pleased to learn that I'd left you here alone. I think she was worried about you."

"That seems improbable," Loki said.

"Not so much as you'd think," Thor said. "If you'd had more time to get to know each other, I think you might have been friends."

"Well," Loki said with a wry smile, "unless she's planning to come back here, it seems that's another missed opportunity." Thor didn't know what look was on his face, but Loki looked away. "Stop that."

"Stop what?" Thor asked. Loki's lips twisted.

"Looking at me like that," he said. "Miserable. Guilty."

"How-" Thor cut off and took a breath. "How can I not feel that, at least a little? All things

considered.”

“It isn’t your fault,” Loki said. Still slumped against the toilet. “Not me dying. Not...this.” He gestured at himself. “Not the...well, maybe the situation. But I can’t...it’s difficult to blame you for that, either.”

Thor wished that felt better to hear. “I should be the one paying the price,” he said. Brunnhilde’s words, but she’d had a point.

“Probably,” Loki said. “But that wouldn’t be half as much fun for him.”

That brought back the image of the Grandmaster with Loki, and Brunnhilde’s words. *You know that your little brother is probably getting his ass railed by Gast as we stand here talking.*

“I’m going to kill him,” Thor said. “Somehow-”

Loki’s head snapped up. “No,” he said. “You won’t. Not only because - I’m not actually sure it’s *possible*-”

“You said you were going to,” Thor pointed out.

“It’s possible I underestimated...what he is. How powerful. How...*old*.” Loki chewed his lower lip, an old nervous habit Thor hadn’t seen in years. “Besides...doesn’t it strike you as likely that if he dies, so do I?”

Thor imagined it. Striking off the Grandmaster’s head with Stormbreaker only to turn to Loki and see his hands fluttering at his throat where bruises were blooming again, listening to him choke as his airway closed. He flinched. “I...”

“I’d expect some kind of clause to that effect.”

Impotent rage and frustration tangled in Thor’s chest. “I’m here again,” he said. “I’ll help keep him away.”

“Be careful making extravagant promises,” Loki said. He rubbed the heels of his hands into his eyes. “I need a drink.”

“Don’t,” Thor said. Loki glanced at him, and Thor said, “if how I found you last night was any indication, you’ve been drinking too much.”

“Hypocrite,” Loki said. “You’ve spent *many* nights practically senseless from too much mead.”

“Not lately,” Thor said. “And I’m not you.”

Loki closed his eyes again. “How else,” he said after a long pause, “am I meant to get through this, Thor?”

Thor’s stomach twisted and he didn’t know *what* he wanted to do. Hit something. Grab Loki and drag him into a hug and just hold him there. Go to the Grandmaster and *beg*, say *whatever I have to do to get you to let him go, tell me, I’ll do it*.

“Let me get you more water,” he said instead, and stood up, because it seemed like the only useful thing he could do.

“I heard you were back!” The Grandmaster said, swanning up to the table where Thor was eating

breakfast, and Loki was barely eating a bowl of fruit. “What a surprise. Lo-lo was - *so* worried, fretting about you just disappearing like that. Not even saying goodbye to *me*.”

“My apologies,” Thor made himself say. “I was in a hurry.”

The Grandmaster waved a hand. “Already forgotten. Right, kitten?” That was directed at Loki, who glanced up from his fruit and smiled.

“Of course.”

Thor shifted slightly and set down his fork. “Actually,” he said, “might I speak with you? In private?”

The Grandmaster’s eyebrows rose. “Ooh,” he said. “How very scandalous.” Thor could see Loki’s eyes widen in his peripheral vision, and ignored it. “What have you got to say away from our dear Lo’s delicate ears? Well - not so delicate, really, you’d be surprised the kind of things...well. I don’t want to *embarrass* him.” He winked broadly in Loki’s direction, who flushed but didn’t look down.

“I’m sure whatever it is can’t be too shocking for me,” he said. There was a warning in his eyes.

“Indeed,” the Grandmaster said, his eyes intent. “So go on, then. What’s the problem, Sparkles?”

Thor took a deep breath and let it out. He very carefully did not look at Loki. “I am...concerned for my brother’s well being.”

The Grandmaster’s amiable expression fell into a frown. “Oh, no,” he said. “Not this again.”

“Thor,” Loki said, “I’m *fine*.”

“When I came back,” Thor said, well aware that he was going to hear from Loki later, “I found Loki in - a state, and I understand that he hasn’t been sleeping well.”

The Grandmaster glanced at Loki. “Is that - did he say that? Because that hasn’t been *my* experience. I mean - well, I *do* understand that there was a bit of difficulty to begin with, but we sorted that right out, didn’t we?”

“Not sleeping well alone,” Thor corrected. He could see Loki’s expression tightening further and further, but he couldn’t just - let this *go*. The fact was that Loki was vulnerable, the Grandmaster had taken advantage of him, and Thor couldn’t stand by idly and watch his brother be *used* by a capricious, mad, immortal.

“Why should he need to?” The Grandmaster said, with a smile that didn’t quite touch his eyes. “A pretty thing like our Lo-lo should *never* sleep alone.”

“I *can* speak for myself,” Loki said tightly.

“Of course you can,” the Grandmaster said soothingly. “Eat your fruit, sugarplum. You’re looking a bit peaked.” Loki’s expression spasmed.

“I just think,” Thor said, but the Grandmaster reached out and put a finger abruptly against his lips.

“Now - now, Sparkles,” the Grandmaster said. “I can appreciate that you, uh...might have some *ideas* about the care and keeping of my favorite kitten. But I feel like you might be getting a little...you know, *jealous*.”

“That isn’t-”

“And I don’t *love* that. I mean, after all the trouble I went to, just for you...”

“Grandmaster,” Loki said, “you needn’t...make too much of this little fit Thor is throwing. It is likely because he feels guilty for leaving in such a hurry.”

Thor just managed not to shoot Loki an angry look, even as guilt *did* twist in his stomach again. The Grandmaster glanced at Loki and looked slightly mollified.

“Oh,” he said. “Oh, is that it? Because that...I could understand that. Forgive it, probably, and we can all move on.”

Thor stared at the Grandmaster, who looked back at him, expression expectant. *No*, Thor wanted to say. *That isn’t it*. The Grandmaster had said neither of them would come to harm. But that suddenly felt like so much air.

“Well?” The Grandmaster said.

Thor felt his shoulders slump. “Yes,” he said. “That’s...just it.”

The Grandmaster smiled at him. “Oh, Sparkles! That’s very sweet of you. But like I said - forgiven, forgotten. I don’t need to hold a grudge. Life’s too short for that - well, not *my* life, but, you know.” He patted Thor on the shoulder - like a dog, Thor thought, who had done a good trick - and circled around to Loki, tipping his chin up and kissing him on the mouth. It looked to Thor’s eye like a show of ownership.

He envisioned cutting off the Grandmaster’s head with a single swing of Stormbreaker. It wasn’t as satisfying as he wanted it to be, because he knew he couldn’t do it.”

“Now - run along, sweetheart,” he said, smiling broadly at Loki. “Remember we’ve got the, uh, a *thing* tonight. You’ll want to get all gussied up - and, hm, maybe a spa day? Seriously, you - you *are* looking a bit rough around the edges.”

Thor wondered how much of this was a show for his benefit. He could see the tightness in Loki’s smile, and wondered if the Grandmaster could as well. “That sounds delightful,” he said. “I’ll do that.”

“I’ll join you,” Thor said, but the Grandmaster’s hand caught his shoulder and pressed down with truly startling force. He sat down hard, mostly out of surprise.

“Oh, no,” the Grandmaster said, smiling. “I think Lo could use some *me* time, and we can, hm, do some catching up.”

Loki was hesitating. The Grandmaster made a dismissive gesture without so much as glancing away from Thor. “Go on, darling. Have a nice time!”

His brother hesitated a moment longer before leaving, though he cast Thor a look that was painfully familiar: *don’t do anything stupid*. The sheer ordinariness, *Loki-ness*, of it made Thor want to smile, no matter how much trouble he was in.

The urge faded when he met the Grandmaster’s eyes and saw the barely hidden darkness glittering there. Only for a moment, however, before he sat down in the chair next to Thor, smiling, and stole a piece of fruit from Thor’s plate.

"Mm," he said. "That's good. Well! Did you have a nice time on...wherever you went?"

"Just business," Thor said. "Nothing exciting." Inspired, he added, "not like here."

The Grandmaster looked delighted. "Oh, well now! That's *so* nice of you to say, Sparkles. I'm - I'm glad we've managed to impress you. I'd started to think that maybe you - ah, didn't like it here."

"No," Thor said. "I'm glad to be back." It wasn't even a lie.

"That's sweet," the Grandmaster said. "Glad to, mmm, get back to your brother's side?"

Thor wondered if that question was meant to be a trap. He could feel the thin ice under his feet, and he didn't know what would happen if it cracked. He might not be the one who would suffer for it. "Yes," he said, though, because he didn't really think there was any point in denying it. "I am. Very much so."

"Of course, of course. Sounds like you, you worry a lot about him. Which, well, I guess he does have a way of getting himself into trouble, does our Loki!"

Not yours, Thor thought angrily. He forced a thin-feeling smile. "He can, yes."

"I can't help but feel like you, uh, have completely the wrong idea about - *me*, though," the Grandmaster said. "Like you think I'm somehow, I don't know...not looking out for him. And that's really - really *hurtful*." He sat back. "I like Lo-lo. I, ha, like him a *lot*. You know that, right?"

So you say, Thor thought sourly. He made himself jerk his head in a nod.

"You're - you're nodding, but I don't think you mean it," the Grandmaster said. "Come on, Sparkles. Let's be *honest* with each other."

Thor bit his tongue to stop the first three things he thought, and finally said, "you have...been taking Loki to your bed."

The Grandmaster looked amused. "Not just the bed," he said. "The bath, the greenhouse, there was one time-"

Thor clamped his hands together so he didn't put them around the Grandmaster's throat, and counted to five. "I am not...jealous," he said. "But..." He needed to frame this carefully. "Loki is not always conscious of his own limits. I'm...*concerned* that he might push himself too hard, too fast." The moment he heard the words out of his mouth he wanted to blanch. The twitch of the Grandmaster's lips suggested that he'd heard the same thing and was trying not to laugh.

"Oh, Sparkles," he said, leaning forward and patting Thor's hand. "I get it."

"You do," Thor said dubiously. The Grandmaster nodded.

"Absolutely! You just want to know that your little brother - not *that* little, ha, *anyway* - is being properly taken care of."

Thor shifted. "I want Loki to be happy, and hale," he said, which he didn't think was exactly the same thing. The Grandmaster nodded.

"Of course! And I want the same thing, really, I do. So that's that, isn't it? Lo-lo and I have - we've got a good thing going. And I'm sure we can agree that it'd be terrible if anything got in the way of

that...good thing. Since, ah, since we both want Lo to be happy. Right?"

No, Thor thought. *Not right, we don't want the same thing at all.*

"See," the Grandmaster said, and Thor heard something shift in his voice, slight but audible. "That all makes sense, doesn't it? You know - you know what? I'm going to invite you to this, uh, thing tonight. Fancy party, should be a blast. Come, check things out - see how good your brother's got it here, lay all these silly worries to rest for good. How does that sound?"

That, Thor thought, sounded extraordinarily ominous, and also not like something he could refuse. Not to mention that he was not going to leave Loki alone with the Grandmaster for a moment if he could help it.

"I would be delighted to attend," Thor said neutrally. The Grandmaster raised his eyebrows.

"Yikes," he said. "You could - you know, you could sound a *little* more enthusiastic, Sparkles, you're going to hurt my *feelings*."

You and I both know that I am not happy about any of this, Thor thought. *Why do you want me to pretend?*

"I just don't want this - uh, *attitude* of yours getting Lo-lo *down*," the Grandmaster said. "You know?"

There was the faintest of edges in his voice. A hint that suggested if Thor didn't shape up, Loki would feel the sting, somehow or other. Thor took a deep breath and forced another smile on his face.

"No," he said. "I wouldn't want that. It was a long journey back and I am tired - that's all."

"Of course, of course," the Grandmaster said, waving a hand. "I figured it was probably just - something like that, wanted to make sure we didn't have any misunderstandings, you know. Lo would just be - *so* upset if we were at odds."

"Perhaps I should go and reassure him that we are not, then," Thor said, hoping his smile was holding.

"Antsy," the Grandmaster said, popping another piece of fruit in his mouth. "All right, all right. Go on, then - I'll expect you at the party! Go easy on the leather, though. You'll want something breathable, trust me, things get *hot* in there."

"Noted," Thor said, standing. "I look forward to it."

"I'm sure you do, Sparkles," the Grandmaster said, beaming at him. "As you should, as you should."

Thor went back to their rooms as quickly as he could and let himself in. Loki's door was closed, but he walked over directly and knocked on it. "It's me," he said.

Loki yanked the door open a couple seconds later, wearing a deep green robe, his hair slightly damp and curling. "What were you *thinking*," he hissed.

"I tried to get you to leave," Thor said.

"Because that would have been better," Loki snapped. "Talking about me behind my back."

Discussing what's to be *done* with me. The only difference between you and him in that conversation was your opinions on how I am to be disposed of."

Thor recoiled, his eyes widening. "You don't mean that," he said. Loki's jaw tightened and twitched.

"Don't I?" He said. Thor stared at him, horrified, and Loki looked away. "Not to mention that you were treading *dangerously* close to the line of what he'll allow. He has the power here, Thor. Not you, and *certainly* not me." The bitterness there was unmistakable. "And he doesn't take disagreement well."

Thor pressed his lips together. "I am not going to grovel and scrape for him."

Loki's lip curled. "Like I am?" He said, soft and vicious, and Thor jerked.

"I didn't mean - Loki-"

Loki turned away from him and stalked back into his room. He didn't close the door, so Thor followed. "I didn't mean it like that," Thor said. "You are - you don't have a choice."

"Of course I have a choice," Loki said, starting to change. "I could refuse to comply. I could fight him. I'd lose, but I could still do it." Thor looked away.

"That isn't a real choice."

Loki stiffened further. "So I am simply a helpless puppet borne hither and yon by the Grandmaster's whims? I suppose that *would* fit with how you just treated me." Thor could have groaned.

"You're twisting my words," he said.

"So you don't think me helpless? Weak? Vulnerable?"

You are vulnerable. "Of course not," Thor said. Loki snorted, and Thor started to protest again before he checked himself. "What are you *wearing*?"

"Party clothes," Loki said shortly. The green was consistent, though it was accented with a color more yellow than gold and dark blue instead of black. His pants were more leggings than anything, tight bordering on indecency. His shirt was just barely opaque and cut to show Loki's collarbones.

"By all means, Thor. Offer whatever commentary you want," Loki said, his voice acid.

Thor swallowed everything he'd been thinking. Loki's lips quirked mirthlessly and he turned on his heel, sitting down at the vanity. Thor stared at his back.

"I thought the party wasn't until tonight," he said stupidly.

"You never know when he might change the time," Loki said. "I may as well be ready."

"I am supposed to be going," Thor said. Loki fell still.

"Oh, are you," he said.

"Yes," Thor said. "And - and I am glad of it. No matter how little I enjoy these affairs, I would rather attend a hundred than leave you alone with *him*."

“My valiant defender,” Loki said, tracing the outline of his eyes in black. Thor frowned at him.

“I am trying to *help* you,” he said.

Loki hissed out a breath. “I gathered that was the goal,” he said tightly, “but what you are *actually* achieving is irritating the man on whose largesse I am utterly dependent, and who could destroy you with a thought. And in the process treating me like a child or an invalid who cannot speak for himself, a delicate and wilting flower - *dammit*!”

The pencil snapped, leaving a dark smudge under Loki’s left eye. He glared at Thor like it was his fault.

“But you aren’t,” Thor said, temper prickling. “Speaking for yourself. The moment I left you gave over-”

“I thought I didn’t have a choice,” Loki said. “Which is it, Thor? Did I throw myself into the Grandmaster’s arms, unable to resist without you as my chaperone, or could I not refuse him and thus am absolved from complicity in my degradation?”

“That isn’t what I-” Thor cut off, inhaling to try to control his burgeoning temper. “Why do you have to take offense at everything I say?”

Loki hissed. “And of course it is I *taking* offense,” he said. “Never you giving it.” He cleaned off his eye and started over.

“Are you picking a fight with me because you can’t have one with him?” Thor said before he could think better of it. Loki stopped breathing for just a moment.

“Why,” he said, voice suddenly and terribly calm. “Because you cannot imagine that I might be angry with *you*?”

Oh, here we go, Thor thought wearily.

“You put me here,” Loki said. “You *left* me here. And now you have the temerity - the *gall* - to judge me?”

“I am not *judging* you,” Thor said. Loki didn’t glance away from the mirror.

“Am I your brother or your burden? Or I suppose it could be both, but I *know* I am not your equal.”

“I have *never* said-”

“You don’t *have* to say,” Loki snapped. “Speaking over me. Discussing my - my *well-being* with *him* as though I am not there.”

“Would you let me finish a *sentence*?” Thor shouted.

“Far be it from me to stand in the way of the mighty Thor!” Loki snapped back.

They glared at each other. Thor’s heart felt like it was pounding in his stomach and he fought for calm.

“You don’t know what it is like,” Thor said finally. “What it *was* like, when you were - gone. And you are back now but you are not - you aren’t *well* and that isn’t an insult, it’s just - *true*.”

Loki’s shoulders trembled. “I remember what happened, Thor,” he said, dead flat. “Fairly vividly.”

“Then can you not understand why I might be *worried*? The Grandmaster doesn’t care about your safety or sanity, but I *do*, and I won’t watch silently while he toys with you.”

Loki pressed his hands flat on the vanity and turned his head. The black lining his eyes only drew attention to the cold fury in his stare. “Get out,” he said.

Thor blinked. “What did I say wrong *this* time?”

Loki’s hands curled into fists. “I said, *get out*.”

Thor opened his mouth and then closed it. He did not want to let Loki have the last word. But continuing this argument didn’t seem likely to get them anywhere, and his own anger was simmering at a dangerous low boil. He did not *really* want to lose his temper with Loki.

He turned and walked out, closing the door behind him. He stood listening for several moments, but he couldn’t hear anything.

Thor wished there was someone he could hit, but the most satisfying possibility was unfortunately not an option.

Loki did not speak to him for the remainder of the afternoon.

Thor tried to draw him out once or twice to blank, stony stares, and finally gave up in frustration and irritation. This, he thought, was always what had maddened him most about Loki: his insistence on playing this game of being angry in Thor’s direction without ever explaining what he was angry *about*.

Well, *fine*. Loki could be an ass if he wanted, but it did not change anything about Thor’s intentions when it came to this wretched party. Loki was, whether he wanted to admit it or not, Thor’s to protect, and that was what he intended to do.

When they left at last, Thor tried once more.

“Do you intend to never speak to me again?” He asked, not quite able to keep the annoyance out of his voice.

Loki glanced at him sidelong. “You think I am just being ornery,” he said. “*Contrary*, perhaps.”

“I don’t think that,” Thor said. “I understand that I offended you by insinuating that...” He sighed, and adjusted. “I do not think any less of you for the Grandmaster’s actions.”

“Do you not?” Loki said, his voice brittle as rusted iron. “You think I cannot protect myself. You think I ought to have refused him. You think I am *weak*.”

“No,” Thor protested, but - that wasn’t true, was it? Not entirely. He did think Loki was - he did not want to use the word *weak*, but he wasn’t as strong as he ought to be. But... “I think,” Thor said slowly, carefully, “that you are in an impossible situation. I think you have endured far more than you should ever have had to, and that has left a mark on you - as it would on anyone.”

Loki’s lips twisted. “Fancy words for the same thing. Perhaps you ought to be called Silvertongue.”

“It isn’t that simple,” Thor protested. He took a deep breath, searching for the right words. “I do - yes, I think that you are - more vulnerable than you might be otherwise, and that worries me. That

worries me, not just because you have too often ignored your own limitations in order to prove yourself, but also because even if you didn't then the Grandmaster would ignore them for you."

"None of this changes," Loki started to say, but Thor stopped him and seized his shoulders, pulling him around.

"But you are here," he said, almost desperately. "You are here, alive and still standing, still *Loki*, and if that is not strength then I do not know what is."

Loki stared at him, breathing rapidly, his eyes wide and startled. Thor squeezed his shoulders. "Wanting to help you doesn't automatically mean that I think less of you," he said quietly. Loki's throat bobbed.

"Thor," he said, voice a little hoarse. Thor smiled unhappily, squeezed again and dropped his hands back to his sides.

"And I am selfish," he said roughly. "*I* do not want to see you suffer."

"I am not suffering," Loki said, but it was such a weak lie that Thor just looked at him reproachfully and he winced. "Fine. Perhaps...sometimes I would rather not - but I can handle it."

"You shouldn't have to *handle* it," Thor said. Loki looked away and sighed.

"But I do," he said. "The Grandmaster's planet. The Grandmaster's rules."

"So break them," Thor said. "When have you ever followed *anyone's* rules?"

Loki shook his head. "You don't understand," he murmured. "You watched him bring me back from the dead and you *still* don't understand." He turned away. "We need to get moving. We shouldn't be late."

Thor didn't know what he'd expected. He sighed, made himself nod - Loki didn't seem *angry* anymore, at least. That was better than nothing.

"Thank you," Loki said after a long silence. Thor glanced at him, startled.

"For what?"

Loki just shook his head.

It wasn't much further before Thor started to hear the sound of Sakaaran music. He squared his shoulders, attempting to brace and steady himself for what was to come. Loki looked like he was doing the same, at least for a moment, but then both posture and expression shifted and he looked...happy to be here. Relaxed. If Thor looked closely he could see the hints of tension, but only just.

It made Thor's skin crawl a little, the ease with which Loki transformed like that But he set it aside as they entered.

The Grandmaster found them almost immediately, appearing seemingly out of nowhere to kiss Loki noisily on the cheek. "Lo-lo! You look just *fantastic*. You didn't get all dolled up just for me, did you?"

"Not at all," Loki said smoothly. "Though your appreciation certainly offers its own incentive." Thor swallowed a growl and could have sworn he tasted bile. The Grandmaster beamed, though,

sliding an arm around Loki's shoulders before he looked at Thor.

"And hello, Sparkles," he said, with somewhat less enthusiasm. "Good to see you too - looking a little dour, though! Let's see if we can't brighten up your night. I'm - ah, I'm good at that. Right, pumpkin?"

Pumpkin, Thor thought with disgust. Loki's expression twitched minutely.

"You certainly are," he murmured, his smile warm and pleasant, and Thor wanted to grab him by the collar and drag him back out of here, whatever Loki said. He held back by force of will, somehow.

"I'm sure," he said, pasting on a smile. The Grandmaster raised his eyebrows and then laughed, patting him on the shoulder with the hand that wasn't on Loki's.

"Let's...uh, drinks? Get you hooked up with something nice - no, don't tell me, I'm going to guess." He pursed his lips, then snapped his fingers. "Got it. Let's see if I'm right, eh? Loki - I already *know* what Loki likes." He winked unsubtly, and Thor wondered if he was being deliberately provoked or if the Grandmaster just didn't care.

He took a deep breath, though he didn't feel terribly inclined to drink anything the Grandmaster gave him. "Thank you," he said. "That sounds delightful."

He followed the Grandmaster as he steered Loki over to the bar and ordered for them both, trying not to hover too obviously, and let the Grandmaster press a drink into his hand. "Here," he said. "Drink up - cheers!" He raised his glass, and Thor clinked obligingly against it and took a small sip, aware of the Grandmaster's close inspection.

It was, he had to admit, good.

"Well?" The Grandmaster said. Thor nodded.

"I like it," he said, and then added, "You have good taste."

"Of *course* I do," the Grandmaster said. "But you're sweet. Let's not just *stand* here, though, let's - mingle! You've hardly spoken to anyone and there's a couple people who've just been, ah, *dying* to meet you."

Thor blinked. "There are?" He glanced at Loki, whose eyes remained on the Grandmaster, watching him in the way some small animal might eye a circling eagle, waiting to see which way it would fly.

"Oh, yes," the Grandmaster said. "You've caught *quite* a few eyes, handsome specimen that you are - I hope you don't mind me saying so." The hair on the back of Thor's neck prickled and to cover his expression he took another small sip of the drink, barely enough to taste it. "Anyway, I wasn't - hmm, I wasn't sure what you're *into*—"

Thor shook his head. "I'm not looking for - anything," he said quickly. The Grandmaster gave him an almost reproachful look.

"Don't knock it til you've tried it," he said. "I just want to make you feel more at home."

"Thank you," Thor made himself say, "but that isn't necessary."

"*Necessary*," the Grandmaster scoffed. "Who needs *necessary*. *Boring*. Let down your hair - well,

what you've got left of it."

"Grandmaster," Loki said. "Thor isn't...judging your hospitality. He's simply a bit of a prude. Surely you've noticed."

Thor couldn't help but be insulted. "I am not," he said. The Grandmaster laughed.

"That *does* sound like something a prude would say. But that's - well, so were *you*, Lo-lo, we can...we can work around that, right? Just have to find the right...temptation. Telas! There you are, I was just looking for you - Thor, Telas, Telas, Thor."

Thor couldn't have said what species Telas was. He found a polite smile. "It's good to meet you," he said, keeping his greeting firmly lukewarm as Telas batted all four eyelids coquettishly at him. He kept one eye on Loki, the Grandmaster pulling him close into his side and whispering something in Loki's ear that made him flush. Thor took another sip of his drink rather than lunge toward them and pry them apart.

See, Loki, he thought bitterly. *I'm learning.*

So it went. The Grandmaster swept them around the increasingly crowded floor, all charming smiles and endless chatter, his hands wandering over Loki's body, though never fully crossing the line into indecency. Thor could see Loki's increasing unsteadiness as well as the level of liquid in his glass dropped.

He'd barely had a quarter of his own, mostly as a way of masking when he thought he was going to snarl, but he could feel his thoughts growing fuzzy. He gulped some water - or at least he hoped it was water - in the hopes of fending it off, but he was not so lucky, and the Grandmaster moved dizzily fast.

It didn't help that the people the Grandmaster was introducing him to were, as time went on, becoming increasingly handsy, enough that he had to remove a few of them physically.

"Now this - I think you'll *really* like each other," the Grandmaster was saying. "This is Laotia - Laotia, this is Thor, you were just talking about him the other day, right?"

"I *was*," Laotia, a - Thor had to allow fairly lovely - Ataraxian. Her skin shifted from blue to rose colored, and she giggled drunkenly. "I mean. Who wouldn't. You're *gorgeous*."

"Thank you," Thor said, with the same carefully polite distance he'd been maintaining with most everyone.

"You're welcome," she said, smiling at him and sidling a little closer. "You were - I didn't see you around for a few days."

"He left us for a bit," the Grandmaster said. "But now he's back!"

Thor shook his head a little, trying to clear it. He shouldn't, he knew, be feeling this drunk - not just from what he'd had. *What did you put in this*, he wanted to ask, but he knew better than that. He looked around for more water, glancing at Loki to check on him. He was leaning on the Grandmaster, his eyes blurry.

"Loki?" he said. "Are you all right?"

"Yes," Loki said promptly. "I'm well," which, Thor realized belatedly, was probably all that he could say.

“Of course he is,” the Grandmaster said, rubbing a hand up and down Loki’s arm. “Just *look* at him. Gorgeous, absolutely...you like hearing that, don’t you?”

Thor clenched his fists as Laotia reached out like she was going to touch his arms. “Are those real?”

“Yes,” Thor said. She looked delighted and laughed again, then stumbled. Thor caught her automatically and she looked up at him, smiling.

“Oh,” she said. “You can keep doing that.”

Thor blinked, oddly dazed. “Doing what?” He said. She moved his hands to her waist and sidled closer, face upturned toward his. She ran her hands over his chest and for some reason, didn’t remove them.

“You really are just *perfect*,” she said.

“I’m not,” Thor said, which he wasn’t. He’d failed at a lot of things. Laotia frowned, though.

“Well, *that’s* not true,” she said. “I have very high standards.” Her skin shifted again, from rose to a deeper red. “I’m not looking for anything serious. Just a bit of fun.”

His head swam. Why had he gotten so *drunk*? He hadn’t meant to. He was supposed to be...

What was he supposed to be doing, again? It was important. He knew it was important. Thor put his hands on Laotia’s waist to steady himself, trying to focus.

“What do you think,” she was saying, hands sliding under his tunic, “we can go back to your place - or mine - get to know each other better...”

Thor realized hazily that he could not see Loki anymore.

Or the Grandmaster.

That broke through Thor’s daze. He shoved Laotia away hard enough that she almost fell and scanned the crowd looking for his brother. He’d been there a minute ago, Thor was *sure* of it, only - only maybe it hadn’t been a minute ago. He shook his head, trying to clear it.

“Hey!” Laotia said. “What was that for-”

“I need to find my brother,” Thor said, and turned to wade through the crowd, looking for the sleek black of Loki’s hair or the shimmer of the Grandmaster’s robe, and if something had happened - this was the Grandmaster’s fault but Thor hadn’t been careful enough, he’d fallen for it and now Loki was gone. *So much for your promises.*

He felt clumsy, ungainly - drunker than he’d been in some time, but he couldn’t care that he was shoving past people and leaving disgruntled partygoers in his wake. He needed to find Loki, *now*-

He caught a glimpse of gold in a corner and shoved toward it, and sure enough it was the Grandmaster and Loki, Loki’s back to the wall and his eyes glazed, the Grandmaster’s hand down the front of those ridiculous leggings.

Thor saw red. He closed the distance in three strides, grabbed the Grandmaster by the shoulder, and hauled him away from Loki, shoving him toward a wall. “Get your hands off him,” he said, intending it to be a growl, but it came out a shout.

The Grandmaster looked genuinely surprised. “Whoa,” he said. “Whoa, easy there, Sparkles, there’s no need to get so wound up-”

Thor stalked toward him, lightning prickling over his skin, an inch away from calling it down on the Grandmaster’s head. “Be *silent*,” he snarled. “And *stay away* from my brother, you won’t lay a *finger* on him or I will cut it off. Do you understand me?” The Grandmaster was beginning to look mildly annoyed, and Thor’s anger surged. He grabbed the front of the Grandmaster’s robe and dragged him forward so he was inches from the man’s face. “*Do you understand me?*”

“Well,” the Grandmaster said. “This is just - you’re very worked up, Sparkles. I think you need to, uh, take a little break, have a sit, maybe some water...”

Thor roared, wordlessly, and hauled back to give in to the urge he’d had since first coming here and punch the Grandmaster in the face.

“All right,” the Grandmaster said. “That’s enough of that.”

The party, and everything else, winked out.

The screaming had stopped.

Thanos’s fingers squeezed the sides of his skull and he was staring at Loki, his face streaked with ash and pale underneath, flanked by Thanos’s lieutenants.

No, Thor thought. *No, this isn’t...I’ve been here before*, but that wasn’t right - and yet he knew what was coming. Knew, and wanted to scream at Loki to get out, to *run*, but the words wouldn’t come out.

“You really are the worst, brother,” he said, and even if they both knew this was part of the plan (*stupid plan, did you really think it would work*) he still saw Loki twitch. He should have said something else. Anything else. Some better last words-

This couldn’t be happening. This had already happened. This was always going to happen, he was always going to be stuck in this moment, these moments, watching, helpless.

Heimdall died. Brutally, with the indifference of swatting a fly. And Loki, emerging from the shadows, all smiles and swagger. Thor would have screamed, tried to scream, *Loki, stop, stop this, run, get out of here-*

Loki struggled, fingers prying at Thanos’s arms, snarling defiance to the end, and Thanos dropped his limp body to the deck in front of Thor’s face.

The world stopped, frozen as he clung to Loki’s unmoving chest and it was all gone, everything was gone.

(You brought him back. You went to Sakaar and the Grandmaster brought him back, remember-)

He couldn’t hold on to the thought.

The war was over, but he was alone.

Valkyrie and the remaining Asgardians had never reappeared, and Thor feared what might have become of them. He hoped that they had found some safe planet to settle, and he just did not know

where. He doubted that they had been so lucky.

He stayed on Earth, because there was nowhere else that he felt he could go, even if on Earth he did not feel at home. The rabbit and his companions offered him a place, but Thor did not take it.

He grieved. He did not know how to stop. All the losses, one on top of another, and it was too much. More than he could bear. He held apart from those who had once been his friends, too aware of their mortality, their fragility. They would die, and everyone who should have been at his side through the long millennia would not be there to comfort him.

He was, perhaps, the last of his kind. In all the wide universe, there might be no others.

He dreamed of Loki. Sometimes of his death, watching him perish and powerless to stop it. Sometimes dreams that were sweeter, gentler, fond memories from their youth that were all the more painful when he woke and remembered once again.

His heart bled, but never seemed to bleed dry.

He was on the *Statesman*—

(No, not this.)

He was on Midgard, watching people disintegrate into dust—

(This isn't real, I lived this once already.)

He stood alone at Jane Foster's funeral in a crowd of strangers. The years stretched and blurred together, the fires of his heart burned to embers. *I am in Hel*, Loki whispered in his dreams, voice hoarse through his crushed throat. *Thor, help me.*

He chased magical solutions, hunted down every lead, but all of them came to nothing. *No more resurrections*, Thanos had said. The road to death only ran one way.

"I, Loki, Prince of Asgard..."

Stop this, please, stop this.

Loki wasn't dead. Couldn't be dead. Thor had believed it twice before, but not this time, this time he knew: there was a trick, must be a trick.

Loki would be back.

If he had to wait a hundred years, a thousand, two thousand, he would wait.

"You need to let go," Valkyrie said, and Thor growled at her.

"Give up, you mean," he said. "I will not. Loki will come back. He always has before." This time could not be different. Thor would not believe it.

The screaming had stopped, because everyone Thor knew was dead. There was a roaring in his ears, and Thor couldn't breathe, couldn't think. There were tears streaming down his face even though nothing had happened yet, but he knew it was going to, he knew—

“All right, stop!”

Thirty-five hundred years alone, it wasn't fair, it wasn't *right* that he alone should not have what was lost returned—

“Odinson...”

I can't bear this, not again, please—

“Stop,” he heard Loki say, anguished. “Stop, *please*.”

“All right, sweetheart,” said an unfamiliar voice. “I think I've made my point.”

Nothing.

Chapter 3

Thor woke up with Loki hovering over him, eyes wide and frightened.

“Loki?” He said, furrowing his eyebrows, and Loki expelled a loud breath, relief suffusing his expression.

“*Thor*,” he said, almost a gasp.

Then memory hammered into Thor. He lunged, grabbing Loki and dragging him to his chest, pressing his face into his hair so he could smell him and be certain he was *real*. Loki squirmed with a startled noise.

“You’re alive,” Thor said, his eyes burning. “You’re alive, it wasn’t real-”

“Yes,” Loki said, his voice wobbling a little. “Thor-” He cut off. “Do you know where you are?”

For a dizzy moment he wasn’t sure (the Statesman, Midgard, Sakaar) but his thoughts clarified, at least on that point. “Sakaar,” he said. Loki sighed out, sounding relieved, and moved back.

“You thought Asgard, last time,” Loki said, audibly unhappy. “I wasn’t sure that there wasn’t...permanent damage.”

Thor pulled back just enough so that he could see Loki’s face, the life in his eyes. He might look pale and miserable but he was *alive* and Thor could still feel exactly how it had felt when he hadn’t been. Fresh as though it had been yesterday that he’d watched—

Nausea surged and Thor let go of Loki and pushed him out of the way so he could bolt to the bathroom and empty his stomach. He heard Loki approach him slowly, hesitantly.

“You’re lucky,” he said quietly. Thor let out a helpless laugh.

“*Lucky*? Do you know what that *goatfucking bastard* did to me?”

“Yes,” Loki said. “Or - well. I suppose not in specifics. But I watched you weep and scream in the grip of a waking nightmare for far too long and wasn’t sure that you would come out of it with your mind intact.”

Thor shuddered with a mixture of horror and embarrassment, his head still hanging over the toilet.

“You tried to strike him,” Loki said more quietly. “Most people would not walk away from that trespass alive. As it is - as it is, he only released you as a - favor to me.”

“And what,” Thor asked, his voice raw, “did you have to do for that favor?” Loki didn’t answer, and Thor shoved himself to his feet, turning to look at Loki. Whatever the look on his face was, Loki flinched. “Don’t worry,” Thor said dully. “It was a very - *pointed* lesson.”

Remember what it was like before I brought him back? Remember what it could be like again? That grief, that pain, yawned like an abyss in front of his feet.

“Thor-” Loki looked away. “I am sorry.”

“What do you have to apologize for?” Thor asked. “I got myself into this. I should apologize to *you*.”

Loki made a strange noise in the back of his throat. "For what? For trying to preserve my virtue? Admittedly stupid, but—"

"No," Thor interrupted. "For...I didn't understand what he was, when I made this deal. If I had, I would have negotiated more carefully."

"Or not done it at all," Loki said. Thor shook his head.

"No," he said. "Never that." He couldn't help it. He grabbed Loki and pulled him close again, burying his face in his hair once more. "My waking nightmare was living without you," he said. "Watching you die over and over again and unable to do more than witness, and the hollow place your absence left behind."

Loki twitched and Thor realized too late that perhaps he should not too casually remind Loki of his death. But he didn't pull away, and in fact seemed to be leaning into him. "Well," he said, "I'm here, it seems. Very much alive. It was only a nightmare."

A nightmare that was true. A nightmare that could be true again. Thor's inhale hurt and he closed his eyes only to open them again just as quickly, hiding from the images freshly branded on his eyelids. His nose and throat burned with the threat of tears.

"I love you," he said with some desperation, because it seemed to him that he hadn't said it enough, before. "I want you to know that."

"I do," Loki said.

"I just want you to be safe," Thor said. "Whole, and happy, and...it does not feel as though it should be too much to ask. It is not fair that - that you haven't had that."

Loki pulled back a little, though his hands stayed on Thor's arms. His lips twisted, the worried furrow between his eyebrows remaining. "Nor have you." He laughed, with little humor. "I can't imagine this is helping."

Thor's stomach ached. "I would rather this than face millennia without my brother beside me."

Loki dropped his head forward with a sigh. His fingers tightened on Thor's arms, and then released.

"You should go," he said.

The air caught in Thor's lungs. "What?" He said blankly, certain he'd misheard. "You want me to..."

"No," Loki said, its quickness a relief. "I do not *want* you to go."

"Then—"

Loki glanced toward the door. "He's - angry," he said. "Very angry, and if you stay - don't take this amiss, Thor, but you're going to make it worse."

There was a lump in Thor's throat that made it hard to force the words out. "I won't. I can control myself."

Loki's expression was pained. "I don't want to doubt you, Thor—"

"But you do," he said, too loudly. "I *just* returned, Loki, and last time I left - and you want me to

leave?”

“I *don't* want you to,” Loki said, “but I also don't want you to get yourself killed, or - or *worse*. You don't...have to go for long. He'll - not forget, but move on, especially if he feels like he's won. That way he can be magnanimous and *forgive* you. But until then you need to keep your head down and you are - not particularly good at keeping your head down.”

All Thor could think was *you're sending me away, look what happened last time I was gone, and I don't want to be away from you right now, I can't be, if I can't see you and touch you how will I be certain you still live?*

His heart fluttered with near panic and he fought it down. Loki started to reach out for him and then stopped. “I can't,” he said. Loki flinched.

“Don't make this harder than it needs to be,” he said, and it was Thor's turn to flinch. “You'll - you'll come back.”

I won't leave, Thor thought, but he was wavering. It felt weak. It felt like slinking off to lick his wounds and abandoning Loki when all he really wanted to do was grab Loki and run far away from this awful place.

But he couldn't. He *couldn't*, because the Grandmaster held Loki's life in his hands. And so he held Thor by the throat.

“All right,” Thor said, slumping. “I'll - go.” The lump in his throat seemed to expand. “How - how long...”

“Give it a day,” Loki said. “Maybe two.” His voice sounded raw. Thor made himself nod.

“And then I'll be back,” he said. Loki looked down, jaw shifting, and Thor hugged him again, his eyes squeezed closed. “I'm *sorry*,” he said again. “I - I should have saved you. From him. From Thanos. I should have...”

He felt Loki tense. “There was nothing you could have done,” Loki said. “You were rather indisposed at the time.”

Thor shook his head. “I still should have...” He didn't know. *Something*. He felt sick, at heart and in body, the deep ache of grief even as he stood here holding his living brother.

“I don't blame you,” Loki said very quietly. “I didn't...then. I just wanted you to survive. That was...all that mattered.”

Some part of Thor released at that *I don't blame you*, an absolution he'd needed to hear and needed to believe. Another part hurt at *all that mattered*. For a moment Thor felt as though *he* couldn't breathe.

“Loki,” he said softly, and Loki's expression spasmed.

“Just go,” he said. And tried for a smile, visibly strained. “Sooner away, sooner returned, yes?”

Not soon enough, Thor thought unhappily. “Please be careful,” he said, shamefully desperate.

“I'll do my best,” Loki said. “There's only so far that 'careful' will take you here.”

It was the middle of the night on Midgard, and Thor slunk back to his cabin hoping to go

unnoticed. Of course, then he just ended up sitting awake on his bed and trying not to think about what Loki might be doing, how much time might have already passed, the nightmares hammered fresh into his head.

He went to Brunnhilde's cabin and knocked on the door. She opened it with bleary eyes and Thor said simply, "do you something to drink?"

She blinked at him a couple of times. "It's the middle of the night," she said. And then, "you're back soon," eyebrows furrowing.

"Is that Thor?" He heard. Natasha's face appeared next to her shoulder. Thor looked back and forth between them and tried not to flush.

"Yes, it is," Brunnhilde said. "It's Thor, interrupting." She squinted at him. "And looking like shit. What happened?"

Thor glanced at Natasha. "Nothing good," he said. "I - am sorry for interrupting. *Do* you have anything to drink?"

Brunnhilde glanced over her shoulder at Natasha, who shrugged one of hers. "Yeah," she said. "I do. The shitty kind."

"That's fine."

Her eyes narrowed a fraction. "Shit," she said after a moment, and looked at Natasha. "I'm really sorry. Apparently my sort-of king is having an emotional crisis."

"That's fine," Natasha said. Thor noticed, distantly, that she was only wearing a sheet. "Where have you been, Thor? You're missed. Steve says you haven't been returning his calls."

"I've been away," Thor said evasively. Natasha shifted, looking suddenly awkward.

"Look," she said. "I know it's been...rough. For you maybe especially. But we're here. You're a friend, Thor, and you don't need to self-isolate."

"He's not. Well, he was, but that's not what he's doing now," Brunnhilde said, still staring at him with her eyebrows furrowed. "He resurrected Loki. Had someone else do it, technically. So he's been commuting."

Natasha blinked. "What?" She said. Thor leveled a glare at Brunnhilde.

"It wasn't going to stay a secret forever," she said. "And it's not like it matters, does it? Besides, now you can tell me why you look like you're going to start crying." She paused. "Shit. Did Gast take it back?"

"Gast?" Natasha said.

"It's none of their *business*," Thor said.

"They're *your* friends," Brunnhilde said. "I'm getting sick of lying for you when they come looking."

Thor felt a pang. He'd thought they'd been avoiding him out of discomfort. Perhaps they'd just been trying to give him space to grieve. He shoved that away and glanced at Natasha, who looked like she didn't quite know what to do with this new information.

“He didn’t take it back,” he said, instead of addressing anything else. “Loki’s...fine.” No, that wasn’t the word. It wasn’t the word at *all*. And he didn’t want to have this conversation while Natasha was here, who had no reason to love his brother and many to hate him.

“If Loki’s alive,” she said slowly, “why isn’t he here?”

Thor gave Brunnhilde a plaintive look.

“I’ll explain later,” she said. “Or Thor will. Actually, yes, Thor will. For now-” She pointed at Thor. “We’re going on a walk.”

Thor turned and walked a few paces away. He didn’t turn back when he heard the door close.

“What happened,” Brunnhilde said.

“How long have you been sleeping together?” Thor asked bluntly, knowing it was an intrusive question and angry enough with her not to care.

“A while. Guess you didn’t notice.” That was meant to sting, and it did. “Are you going to answer the question?” Thor said nothing, and her voice softened a little. “How bad is it?”

Thor closed his eyes. “Bad,” he said, and admitting it to himself so bluntly - hurt. “Loki’s...he’s *not* fine. He barely sleeps, he barely eats, the Grandmaster has him on the end of a string and he’s - he treats him like a *pet* and Loki *allows* it. No,” he corrected himself. “Not *allows*. He doesn’t have a choice. And I - I watch and do *nothing*, because when I try all I do is make things worse and Loki has to bend over backwards trying to make up for it-”

Brunnhilde stepped up next to him and held out a flask. Thor took it and drained half of it, wishing it burned more.

“I tried to punch him,” Thor said.

“Loki?” Brunnhilde asked, eyebrows shooting up.

“*No*,” Thor said, horrified. “No - the Grandmaster.”

She said nothing. Then, “oh. Fuck. And you’re still *alive*?”

Thor closed his eyes. “That’s why I’m here. Loki said it would be best if I...left for a little while.” And he still hated it. Still felt like he should have stayed, and damn the consequences.

Except he couldn’t. The possible consequences were too great.

“Damn,” Brunnhilde said. “Your brother must - he must really like your brother.” Thor had a feeling she’d changed what she was going to say. His hand curled into a fist.

“I don’t think that’s the right word,” he said, voice strained. “He likes toying with Loki. Playing with him. If Loki was *himself* he’d be able to - but he’s not.” He breathed out harshly and added, “if you say that you told me so-”

“I won’t,” she said. “I’m not that much of an asshole. It’s...a shit situation. I wish I had a solution. If it helps...” She shrugged. “Loki’s a survivor.”

“He’s died three times,” Thor said.

“And come back,” Brunnhilde pointed out. “But that’s not what I mean. I mean - sheer stubborn

obstinacy. Loki's sturdier than you give him credit for."

"You haven't seen him," Thor said. She shifted.

"Maybe I should."

Thor stared at her, squinting to try to make out the expression on her face. "What?"

"Maybe I should go to Sakaar with you when you go back," she said. "You know I'm not your brother's biggest fan, but - if I came back from the dead and my only company was my older brother who's - sorry - kind of a mess, Gast, and people who are probably plotting to stab you in the back? I'd be going crazy."

Thor's initial reaction was *you don't think I am enough?* but...of course that wasn't what she was saying. And she had a point. Except for Thor, Loki was alone. Friendless.

"I wouldn't expect you to want to go back," Thor said after a moment.

"I don't," Brunnhilde said. "And if someone tries to kill me, I fully expect you to help me kill them back. But...you're my friend, Thor. And like I said - Loki might be an asshole, but he's an asshole I could probably like if I got the chance."

Thor closed his eyes, trying to imagine bringing Brunnhilde back with him. What Loki would say, what he would do. "Let me ask him," he said after a moment. "I don't think...Loki often dislikes surprises at the best of times."

"You do that." Brunnhilde rolled her shoulders back. "It's just a thought. Maybe a bad one. I don't know. Thor..."

"No," Thor said heavily. "I wouldn't have thought of it, but you have a point. About...it probably isn't good that it's just me there, talking to him. And I..." He rubbed his eyes. "Not to mention that I always seem to manage to say the wrong thing and make things worse. Not just with the Grandmaster. With Loki. I upset him without meaning to, and - and I'm supposed to be *helping*."

Brunnhilde sighed heavily. "I'm not good at this." She sat down on the grass. "You probably *are* helping. I imagine it'd be a lot worse if you weren't there."

Would it? I dragged him out of Valhalla in the first place, and I'm barely helping and sometimes outright harming, it was selfish to bring him back and I still cannot regret it. Is there something monstrous in that?

He sat down heavily next to her. "I don't know what I am doing."

"No, shit," she said. "You're a mess, Your Majesty." Thor frowned at her, and she spread her hands. "What? You are. It's not exactly surprising. We could go over the events of the past couple years but I'd really rather not."

"This is not comforting," Thor said.

"You wanted comforting, you came to the wrong place," Brunnhilde said, but then she sighed and leaned toward him, butting her shoulder against his. "Sorry your life sucks right now."

"I keep thinking," Thor said, "that there has to be a way to get him out of there."

"You'd have to figure out a way to get the Grandmaster to let go," Brunnhilde said. "And he

doesn't do that easy. Or...much of ever."

"I'm not going to let go either," Thor said with some vehemence.

"I never said you would. That's kind of why you're in this mess, isn't it?"

Anger flared up hot in Thor's chest. "I thought you said that you *weren't* going to say that you told me so," he said flatly.

"Whoops." Brunnhilde shook her head. "It's who you are, I guess. And I can't exactly throw stones about stupid."

"If you don't have any ideas of how to help," Thor said tightly, "you can leave and go back to entertaining Natasha."

For a second he thought she *was* going to leave, but she didn't, just sat there quietly. "I don't," she said finally. "Least, not right now. I'll keep thinking, see if anything pops out at me. Until then...you should go to bed."

"I can't sleep," Thor said. The anger was bleeding away again, just leaving him exhausted and unhappy. Picturing Loki as he'd looked when Thor had woken up, pale and frightened; picturing him as he looked when Thor closed his eyes, terrified and struggling for air. No, he couldn't sleep. "That's why I asked about the drink."

"Planning on just drinking your way through the next two days until you head back?"

"I was thinking about it," Thor said, only half joking, and a grim one at that. He shook his head. "You can go. I don't need to keep *you* up all night."

"I was already going to be up all night," she said, brightly enough that Thor suspected she was fishing for a response. He gave her a groan, because he felt like he owed it to her. After a moment she cleared her throat and said, more seriously, "like I said - Loki's a survivor. He can hold it together."

He shouldn't have to, Thor thought unhappily. *We shouldn't have to do this. Doesn't he deserve a rest? Don't I?*

He made himself nod in what he hoped passed for understanding, or acceptance, though he wasn't really feeling either.

Natasha came and found him the next morning, fully clothed. "Hey," she said. "I guess we should talk?"

"I suppose we should," Thor said, burning his tongue on a cup of coffee that tasted like mud and would do nothing to counteract his exhaustion. "Since Brunnhilde saw fit to tell you what wasn't her business to tell." He couldn't keep the sourness out of his voice. And didn't particularly try.

"I would've rather heard it from you," Natasha said. "But I have to wonder if you were ever planning on saying anything."

Thor sighed. "Had all gone as planned I would have had to," he said, under his breath. Louder, he said, "I wasn't inclined to deal with the inevitable disapproval."

He could not quite keep the bitterness out of *that*, either.

Natasha grimaced. "That's...fair," she said. "I doubt anyone would've been thrilled over the idea."

"I know," Thor said flatly.

"But," Natasha pressed on, sounding determined, "it's done now. Right? So...where's Loki?"

"A long way away," Thor said. "You'll be glad to hear. On a planet called Sakaar."

"Sakaar," Natasha said. "Isn't that - where Bruce was?"

"Yes," Thor said. "That's where I found him."

"Thor..." Natasha rubbed her forehead. "I can drag this story out of you like pulling teeth, or you can just tell me and save us both the time."

"Fine," Thor said. He set down his mug and jerked to his feet. "What has Bruce told you about Sakaar?"

"Not much," Natasha said after a hesitation. "He says he doesn't really remember. And that he doesn't want to talk about it. I've left it alone."

"Sakaar is the planet where the waste of the universe goes," Thor said, his voice hard. "Hundreds of portals, large and small, empty out there, on its surface. It is ruled by a capricious madman who calls himself the Grandmaster, and who also happens to be both immortal and one of the most powerful beings in the universe."

Natasha narrowed her eyes. "But he didn't get involved. Dealing with Thanos."

"I doubt he cared enough," Thor said. "It's possible he didn't even notice. Brunnhilde told me that he has power over life and death. That he'd resurrected people before. So I went so see if, at the very least, I could have *one* person back."

"Loki," Natasha said, her voice almost soft. "So this...Grandmaster. Is that 'Gast'?"

"That's what Brunnhilde calls him. A surname, maybe. I don't know."

"And he did it," Natasha said. "Brought Loki back to life."

The thin whine from Loki's throat as his body shook. The agony, Thor thought, of having one's soul forced back into abused flesh. He shoved that thought out of his mind. "He did."

"Not for free, I'm guessing."

"No," Thor said. "Not for free."

"Does that have something to do with why you're...commuting?"

How much could he say? How much did he *dare* to say, that Loki would not hate him for later? (Probably nothing. Probably it wouldn't matter, because Loki would never know, because Loki would never leave Sakaar.)

Thor shoved that thought out of his mind, too.

"Yes," he said finally. "His condition was that Loki remain there with him. I am permitted to go and come back, but he...must stay on Sakaar."

Natasha made a sort of “hmm” sound. “I’m surprised Loki’s gone along with that,” she said. “I’d think he’d slip out first time this Grandmaster was looking the other way.”

Thor shook his head. “He can’t. If Loki leaves - or tries to leave - he’ll die. Again.”

“Neat,” Natasha said after a moment. “And I take it this - Sakaar isn’t exactly a vacation destination.” She didn’t pause long enough for him to answer that. “You said *he’s* fine. You’re pretty clearly not. Can I ask what happened?”

Thor shook his head. “I don’t want to discuss it.”

He thought she would press him, but though Natasha scanned his face intently she just nodded.

“All right,” she said. “So. This deal you made - was it a written contract or just verbal?”

“Verbal,” Thor said after a moment. “Why?”

“So you didn’t sign anything.”

“My word is my bond,” Thor said. “I don’t need to put it to paper.”

“Hmm. What do you know about this kill switch? Is it magic? Something that can be turned off?”

“I don’t know,” Thor said after a beat. “I haven’t wanted to risk - why are you asking?”

The look Natasha gave him was almost offended. “We need to understand how the agreement works before figuring out how to make it void.” Thor stared at her, and Natasha breathed out loudly. “Really? No one wants to see you spending the rest of your life miserable, Thor, and right now you’re pretty damn miserable. You’ve got friends, remember? So let us help.”

“Help?” Thor asked blankly.

“I assume you don’t want Loki to stay there,” she said. “Obviously I’m not sure how much we can do, but - we should at least *try*. I haven’t talked to anyone yet - I wanted to get the story from you, first - but since I’m guessing that you aren’t planning on staying planetside for long, I can catch everyone else up on the news. Maybe we can think of something you haven’t. Or at the very least we’ll be ready to back your play.” Her small smile was crooked, maybe a little uncomfortable. “If you want.”

They did not - could not - understand what they were dealing with, Thor thought. What the Grandmaster *was*. Thor had not really understood. And he didn’t know that he believed there was much his Midgardian friends could do. But that at least there was willingness to try, for *Loki* - well, for Thor, but that they were willing to help Loki for his sake...that lifted his heart, just a little.

“Natasha...” Thor hesitated, searching for the right words, and finally simply said, “thank you.”

“You’re welcome,” she said, crooked smile growing just a fraction.

Twenty four hours, Thor told himself. A full cycle around Earth’s star. That should be enough, shouldn’t it? And he could keep himself busy for that time, find ways of occupying himself to keep his mind away from Sakaar, and from Loki.

Until he could go back, there was no use in obsessing over what had happened, what could be happening, the fact that too much of him was humming with fear that he might go back and find that Loki was gone, that the Grandmaster had taken back what he’d given because Thor hadn’t

controlled himself.

When he went back, he would do better. Would toe the line, and somehow - *somehow*...there had to be some way out. Or if there wasn't, Thor would find a way to make one. Without putting Loki in danger.

Somehow.

All of that was easier said than done, though. Everything he was trying not to think about circling in his head as he moved among the Asgardians and spoke with them about their efforts, trying to offer what encouragement and hope he could. Memories ate at him, flashing before his eyes when he least expected. The food he forced down was tasteless and he caught himself tracking the path of the sun across the sky.

Natasha had gone. Thor sought out Brunnhilde.

"Spar with me," he said. She eyed him for just a moment, then nodded.

"All right. Weapons or hand-to-hand?"

"Hand-to-hand," Thor said. She stretched.

"Right, then," she said. "Let's find some clear ground."

Thor knew that she was a good match for him. More than - she had the benefit of experience, and a number of dirty tricks that he was still learning. That was what made it good, though - let all thought be driven out of his mind by the exertion, the impact of their bodies against each other.

It couldn't last forever, of course, but at least it cleared his head for a while, and even once they were done Thor felt...just a little better. Not *much*, but a little.

"Counting the hours, aren't you," Brunnhilde said, bumping her shoulder into his as she tossed him a bottle of water. "Has it occurred to you what you're going to do if you run into trouble? If all isn't forgiven?"

That hadn't lasted. Thor pressed his lips together. "I have to go back."

"I know you do," she said. "I'm just saying. Maybe you should bring backup."

"I thought we decided it would be better to wait," Thor said.

"That was before I thought about the fact that you're walking back into a situation where you seriously pissed off the fucking *Grandmaster*," she said.

Thor shook his head. "I don't want to look like a threat. Or like I'm threatening him." He forced a smile. "I'll be fine. Loki said that if I made the Grandmaster think I was *contrite* enough then he'd let it go."

Brunnhilde grimaced, but she nodded. "Okay," she said. "If you're sure." She paused, and then said, "I'm going to write your brother a note. Don't read it."

"A note? Saying what?" Thor asked.

"If I told you that'd defeat the purpose of you not reading it," she said. "Don't worry, it's not going to say anything bad about you."

That hadn't actually occurred to Thor. "Thank you," he said dryly.

"You're welcome."

After a brief pause, Thor said again, and more seriously, "thank you." She glanced at him, confused, and Thor clarified, "for your helping me. Now, and...in the past. You have been a support to me when I had all too few of those."

Brunnhilde seemed uncomfortable. "You're welcome," she said. "Just doing my duty for good old Asgard."

Thor shook his head a little. "You and Loki," he said. "All self-aggrandizement until someone offers you any genuine gratitude." But mentioning Loki, however briefly, brought back the ache of worry.

"Another bout?" Thor asked Brunnhilde hopefully. She raised her eyebrows.

"This how you deal with all your feelings?" She asked. "Beating people up?"

"Only sometimes," Thor said. "And only when they have a fair chance of beating me up back."

"Fair enough," Brunnhilde said. "All right, Your Majesty, since you asked, I can kick your ass again."

Eight more hours. Thor doubted he would sleep for any of them.

Thor landed back on Sakaar knee-deep in a pile of trash, which seemed about right. A group of scavengers turned in his direction only to quickly head the other way when Thor hefted Stormbreaker over his shoulder, fixing his eyes on the Grandmaster's tower.

He took a deep breath, let it out, and started walking, rehearsing what he was going to say to the Grandmaster when he saw him. Trying not to dread what sort of state Loki might be in when Thor saw *him*.

This time he'd known Thor wasn't abandoning him. That had to make *some* kind of difference.

He walked up to the reception desk on the ground floor of the Grandmaster's tower, glancing briefly at the eerily lifelike statue of the Grandmaster lounging that occupied the center of the room. "Hello," he said to the colorfully feathered person sitting there. "My name is Thor. Do you know where I might find the Grandmaster?"

Thor had debated, some, over whether he should go directly to Loki or speak to the Grandmaster first. Ultimately, he'd decided that if he wanted to give the impression of contrition, he shouldn't act like he was trying to sneak in behind the man's back.

The receptionist fluttered their crest of feathers. "Do you have an appointment?"

"No," Thor said after a moment. "But I am...a personal guest."

The receptionist stared at him a moment longer, then seemed to decide that it was Thor's problem and waved him toward the elevator. "Floor 29," they said, and turned back to what they'd been doing, which appeared to be some sort of game. Thor strode for the elevators and waited as it ascended at a frustratingly leisurely pace.

He remembered standing in one of these, talking to Loki. Baiting him. He'd known there was a

chance that he was wrong and Loki would do just what Thor was proposing: walk away. But Thor hadn't thought he was wrong.

And he hadn't been, ultimately. Loki had come back, and fought for Asgard, and died for Asgard. Maybe it would have been better for Loki if he'd kept his distance, after all. He would never have died. The Tesseract would have been left behind in the ruins of Asgard, which would mean no attack on the ship - but no, if Loki hadn't come, there would have been no ship.

Thor shook himself as the elevator halted and the doors opened with a chime. Thor rolled his shoulders back and stepped out.

He followed the sound of chatter down a hallway to an open door that led out onto a balcony where the Grandmaster was holding court, gesturing with a glass in one hand, his other arm around the shoulder of a woman with shimmering golden skin. "Like I was saying," the Grandmaster said, "at that point it was just - oh, hey, will you look at that! Look who it is, everyone, our very own Lord of Thunder."

Thor forced a smile, hoping it didn't look as strained as it felt. "Grandmaster," he said.

"Excuse me, Serena - oh, dear, that's not it, is it. Salona? I'll have it in a minute." The Grandmaster disentangled himself and stood, strolling over to Thor. "Sparkles! You're back. Here I was wondering if we'd seen the last of you."

I'm sure you would have been crushed, Thor thought, but he held his face still and shook his head. "I wanted to-" This was the part he was going to choke on. "-apologize. For my conduct. I was overwrought." Norns. He was going to be sick. *Loki. Remember Loki.*

"You really were, weren't you?" The Grandmaster scrutinized him, eyebrows slightly raised. "Things got a bit out of hand, you were...*very* worked up. It was not *great*, let me tell you, really a, uh, a mood killer."

Thor suppressed his furious shudder. "I know," he said. "I left so that I could better...calm down, and I am here to assure you that it will not happen again."

The Grandmaster smiled. "I certainly *hope* not! But - that's all right, Sparkles, we're...it's good, we're good. I'm not one to hold grudges! Already over it. Hey, someone bring this guy a drink--"

"Actually," Thor said quickly. "I'd...like to talk to Loki. Tell him I'm back." The Grandmaster blinked at him.

"There's no *rush*, is there?" He said. "He'll be there. Take a little time to get settled. Spend a little time with *me*. Doesn't that sound nice?" His smile was easy, but his eyes were sharp and glittering and Thor knew he couldn't refuse. Not safely. Not without consequences, and his memory of what *consequences* from the Grandmaster could look like was altogether too close behind him.

"Very well," Thor said, holding his smile with an effort. "One drink."

"At least," the Grandmaster urged. "And, uh. Nothing special added. I promise."

There was no way of knowing if that was true. Thor determined to just try to drink as little as possible and pour out what he could.

It was over an hour and a half before Thor managed to break away and excuse himself. One of the attendants had been refilling Thor's glass as quickly as he managed to pour it into the potted plants,

and if he was very far from *drunk* he was a little light-headed. Still, he was steady enough. The Grandmaster had said he didn't know where Loki was; Thor went to check their rooms first and drop off Stormbreaker. He heard the shower running and briefly considered if he ought to just wait and surprise Loki when he came out, but that seemed likely to backfire badly.

He knocked on the door instead and said, "Loki? It's me."

"*Thor?*" He heard, muffled, and a moment later the door jerked open. Loki stared at him, dripping wet, and he went visibly limp. "You're back," he breathed, and Thor couldn't help but smile. This one smaller but far more genuine than any he'd given the Grandmaster.

"I'm back," he said. "Finish your shower. Then we can talk."

Loki's smile hurt to see, but he withdrew, leaving the door open just a crack. Thor did a circuit of the room while he waited, poking his head into Loki's bedroom in case he might see something that would give him an idea of how Loki had been in his absence. He couldn't gather anything, though; he would just have to ask, and hope that Loki would be honest.

Loki emerged before too long wearing a blue and gold robe. Thor eyed the colors with a frown but pushed it out of his mind.

"I spoke to the Grandmaster," Thor said, and Loki's eyes widened. He quickly added, "as you said, he seems to have let things go, and accepted my apology, so we've-" Thor cut himself off, his gaze catching on something glinting on Loki's ear. "What's that?"

"What's what," Loki said, but he turned his head slightly. Thor closed the distance between them, reaching out and cupping Loki's chin so he could turn his head back. Loki shook him off, taking a quick step away, but not quickly enough. Thor's chest started burning.

It was relatively small, but there was a new gold ring adorning the shell of Loki's ear.

Thor took a deep breath until he thought he could speak without shouting. "Tell me this was your idea."

"It was my idea," Loki said promptly.

"Liar," Thor said. One of Loki's shoulders twitched up and then down, not quite a shrug.

"It is just an earring. I don't really mind."

"It isn't," Thor said, "and you know it."

"What do you want me to say?" Loki asked, a bit of bite in his voice. "I had to find a way to mollify him after you left. That meant assuring him that he wasn't in danger of - losing control of me."

Thor's stomach plunged. Loki hadn't said *this is because of you*, but he didn't need to. Loki stared at him a long moment with his lips pressed together, only to finally sigh and glance away. "You don't need to look so stricken."

"This is my fault," Thor said in a voice that came out sounding small.

"Only somewhat," Loki said, which just made Thor feel worse. "Thor, you shouldn't--"

"I am going to get you out of here," Thor interrupted. "I am - *going* to find a way to get you free of

him. I don't know how, not yet, but--"

"Thor," Loki interrupted, his voice quiet and tired, "please don't make promises that you can't keep."

Thor's throat closed. "I *will* keep it," he said. "Remember? Surrender is not in my nature."

"Sometimes you need to learn it," Loki said. There was something unhappy but resigned in his eyes. "There are some fights you can't win."

Thor stared at Loki, his heart aching. He'd known this was wearing at Loki. Wearing him down. But this...he seemed to have gotten worse. Given up in some new way. "I don't accept that," he said finally, voice hoarse. Loki dropped his head forward, and Thor lurched toward him, reaching out to clasp the back of his neck; he felt Loki tense but he didn't pull away. Thor did, like he'd been burned. "You deserve better than this," he said.

"But this is what I have," Loki said. Thor closed his eyes and took a deep breath.

It didn't matter if Loki didn't believe it, Thor told himself. He would find a way, and prove him wrong. But since he did not want to argue, he just drew Loki into a hug, still grateful that he could. Still grateful to feel the solidity of Loki's body, the movement of his back as he breathed.

He pulled away slowly, and reluctantly. "Have you eaten?"

"Not today." Loki rubbed his eyes, which looked suspiciously red; Thor decided not to say anything. "To be honest, I haven't had much of an appetite."

Thor wasn't surprised. Eating had always been one of the first things to go when Loki was in distress. "Go on and get dressed," he said. "I'll have some food sent."

"You haven't been back a half an hour and you're already giving me orders?" Loki said, his voice straining too hard for normalcy.

"Longer than that," Thor said. When Loki gave him a quick look, he said, "the Grandmaster kept me for a little while. I think he was just showing that he could."

Loki stared at him. "I'd hoped to manage that reintroduction," he said, voice a little high pitched. Thor forced a smile.

"I didn't want him to think I was trying to circumvent him," he said. "And it seems I conducted myself well enough."

Loki took a deep breath and let it out. "It seems so," he said. "Norns. Well, I'm...glad it worked out."

Thor's smile felt grim. "I'm learning," he said, and then pointed toward the bedroom. "Clothes. Food."

Loki grimaced at him, but to Thor's relief he went. Thor's eyes caught again on the flash of gold in his ear, and his stomach clenched with a mix of nausea and hatred.

He forced himself to turn away, trying to put it out of his mind.

Thor requested food for them both and watched Loki pick at his with worry, wondering how hard he dared to push. He thought of what Brunnhilde had said and shifted.

“Would you like to...have visitors?” Thor asked carefully. Loki’s head came sharply up.

“Visitors,” he said warily. “Doesn’t that seem...unlikely, under the circumstances? And besides,” he let out a forced laugh, “who, exactly, is so keen on seeing me?”

“Brunnhilde offered,” Thor said, and Loki rocked back.

“Brunnhilde? The *Valkyrie*?”

“Yes,” Thor said. “She thought you might appreciate...fresh company.” He paused, and remembered— “She gave me a note to give to you.” He got up to pull the letter out of his things and set it down in front of Loki, who picked it up and stared at it.

“Did you put her up to this?” Loki asked. Thor frowned.

“No,” Thor said. “As I said, she offered.”

Loki just stared a moment longer, and then crumpled the letter in his fist. “Oh,” he said, voice brittle, “so it’s like *that*.”

“What?”

“You’re going to - start bringing your friends here to - to *gawk* at me, or worse, pity me—”

Thor shook his head, taken aback. “That isn’t what it would be.”

“Wouldn’t it?” Loki said. “She’d come, we’d make awkward conversation, and then she would leave. Like I am an animal in a zoo, to be visited for a time and then be left behind again.”

Oh, Thor thought, suddenly understanding. Loki knew the bars of his own cage. And much as he behaved as though he accepted them... Thor grimaced.

“I take your point,” he said. Loki looked away.

“I wonder,” he said, “if hounds hunt wolves with such alacrity, for envy of their freedom.” After a long moment he picked up his fork again, staring down at his plate. Thor looked at him unhappily, searching for the right words.

“I don’t want you to be alone,” Thor said. “With only me as a friendly face. And I do not want you to believe that you are...forgotten.”

“Every glimpse of the outside world reminds me of what I cannot have,” Loki said, but then his shoulders slumped. “I think I would almost rather forget entirely.”

Thor swallowed hard against the lump in his throat. “That would mean forgetting me.”

“It would mean your letting go,” Loki said. Thor jerked, feeling a little as though Loki had struck him.

“No,” he said. “Never.” Loki looked away, and Thor said, desperately, “you don’t *truly* mean you want that.”

“No,” Loki said after heartbeats where Thor held his breath. “I don’t want that. But some part of me wishes I did.” He sighed. “She can come. Brunnhilde. Though we should probably mention it to the Grandmaster first, to ensure she isn’t putting her life at risk.”

Relief was elusive. It seemed like Loki's agreement ought to be a good thing, but Thor wondered if Loki had accepted more for Thor's sake than his own. "What happened?" he asked, though almost fearful of the answer.

"Nothing," Loki said. "Or - nothing new. I am just tired." His smile looked a little wan. "But I *am* glad to see you back, Thor. Immeasurably so."

That, at least, soothed some of the ache in Thor's heart. "I am in no hurry to leave again," he said firmly. And especially not now, when what Loki said seemed to him far too close to despair, and Thor feared what Loki might do if he sank too far into that black pit. *Some part of me wishes I did.*

This time, Thor had sworn to himself, he would do a better job of protecting his brother. So far, he feared he had not kept that promise. Loki might be alive, but he was far from well, and very far from *safe*.

He would just have to try harder, because he didn't think he could bear losing Loki again.

Thor settled back into life on Sakaar - such as he could settle into life on Sakaar, which wasn't much. The Grandmaster did indeed seem to have forgotten Thor's attack on him, but Thor trusted that about as far as he trusted anything the Grandmaster said or did.

And Loki...Loki played his part to the hilt and with apparent ease, like he belonged on this wretched planet. Thor hovered at his shoulder and watched with horrified fascination, trying to step in when he could - when Loki seemed to be teetering, or seemed a little drunker than he should be, or he caught the dangerous gleam in someone's eyes of a predator sensing blood. Thor knew he was making enemies, but so long as he stood between them and Loki, he couldn't much care.

And the times Loki vanished for a while and returned with clothes and hair rumpled - Thor tried not to think about it, and hated himself with bitter force for not doing more. He wondered more than once if he could go to the Grandmaster, make some kind of trade, himself for Loki-

He balked just at the thought, stomach twisting. Wretched guilt rose up - *you'll give him over to a fate you're unwilling to face yourself* - and he reminded himself that it wasn't *him* the Grandmaster wanted. Still, the hypocrisy of it made him feel sick.

One evening Loki returned shaky and ashy pale, and didn't say a word to Thor before shutting himself in the bathroom. Only moments later Thor heard him retching violently and dropped his head wearily forward before walking over and opening the door. He knelt down next to him and held Loki's hair back as he emptied his stomach.

"Loki?" Thor said gently. Loki made a faint, unhappy sound.

"I'm fine," he said.

"Clearly not," Thor said, holding the burst of frustration out of his voice. "What happened?"

"Nothing," Loki said. Thor let his silence communicate his disbelief, and Loki slumped. "Somehow he always..." He trailed off.

"Always what?" Thor asked, though a part of him didn't particularly want to.

Loki spat and rubbed the back of his hand across his mouth. "Always finds new ways to remind me of what I am," he said, barely audible. A fist squeezed Thor's heart.

“You’re not a *what*,” he objected, too loudly.

“I am to him,” Loki said. “A pet at best. A toy at worst. And he’s the one who owns me. Who can do whatever he wants to me.”

Thor did not want to think about that *whatever he wants*. He felt that he should: Loki had to live it. *Your fault*. “But that isn’t what you *are*,” he tried to protest.

“Not to you,” Loki said dully. “But everyone else...” His head was bowed forward so that Thor could not see his expression. “I will be well, Thor. This will pass. Today was...he was making a point.”

“What point?” Thor asked. Loki just breathed quietly for a few seconds.

“That it doesn’t matter that you’re here,” he said finally. “That he expects to come first. That ultimately I owe my life to him, and not to you.”

He would never have brought you back if it weren’t for me, Thor wanted to say, but that was no defense. And he was right, wasn’t he? All Thor had done to return Loki to life was bargain it away. Guilt gnawed at him. “That doesn’t give him the right,” Thor started to say.

“He thinks otherwise.” Loki swallowed convulsively, and closed his eyes. “I don’t want...I don’t want to talk about this.”

Thor winced. “Of course,” he said quickly. “Of course we don’t need to. Do you...want some water?”

“Please,” Loki said, flushing the toilet and pushing himself to his feet, though he braced one hand on the counter like he was still struggling to stand steady. Thor gave him one last worried look before he went to fill a glass. As he poured he heard Loki say, “he told me he needed proof that I - *trust* him. And then he put his hands around my throat.”

Thor fell still. The image flashed into his head of Loki’s bloodshot eyes, the ring of bruises, his feet kicking, and he bit his tongue to control himself.

“I don’t know how I...I let him,” Loki went on, a distant quality to his voice, eerily toneless. “I let him tighten his fingers until I couldn’t breathe and somewhere I was - I could feel something breaking but it wasn’t me, it was someone else. And when he was done and I still couldn’t breathe, he ran his fingers through my hair and comforted me and I was grateful.”

In that moment, Thor hated the Grandmaster more than he had hated anyone in his entire long life. More than Malekith, his mother’s murderer; more than Hela, who had slaughtered his people; more than *Thanos*.

And he couldn’t fight him. Couldn’t bring him to a battlefield and shed his blood, shatter every bone until he begged for mercy. He couldn’t do *anything*.

Except go back to Loki, set the glass of water down next to him, and draw him into the gentlest hug he could manage. “Loki,” he said, hearing the raw note in his own voice. “I...I’m *sorry*. This shouldn’t be happening to you.”

“But it is,” Loki said quietly. “And it is going to keep happening.”

Not forever, Thor thought desperately. *I will find a way out, I swear it. Somehow*. But he didn’t say it. He remembered what Loki had said before, about not making promises. He’d never felt quite so

helpless as he did now. “What can I do,” he asked.

“I don’t know,” Loki said, still hushed, muted. “I don’t know, Thor. I wish I had an answer.” He laughed, forced and ragged. “I make myself sick.”

“No,” Thor said. “You’ve done nothing wrong.”

“I gave in,” Loki said. “And keep giving in. Over and over. And I’m not going to stop, either.”

“You can’t,” Thor said. “You told me as much. *I* should be doing more, *helping* more—”

“Don’t,” Loki said. “This isn’t about your shortcomings.” He hadn’t tried to pull away, his body limp and heavy against Thor’s. “I do not expect you to do anything.”

“I wish you did,” Thor blurted out. “You *should* be able to expect me to be able to—”

“You’ve always wanted to be able to fix everything,” Loki said. “It drove you mad, when there were things you could not.”

“It frustrated me more when you wouldn’t let me try,” Thor said.

“Let’s not talk about this,” Loki said after a long silence. “We won’t get anywhere. And for once...for once, I don’t actually want to argue.” He leaned against Thor. “I am tired. Would you...” He paused. “Would you lie down with me? You needn’t stay, just...for a bit.”

Thor’s heart ached. “Of course I will,” he said. “And of course I’ll stay.”

Thor was hovering by Loki’s shoulder at yet another party when the Grandmaster swept up next to him, all smiles. “Mind if I borrow your brother?” He said lightly, and Thor stiffened before he realized that he was talking to Loki. “Of course you don’t,” he went on before Loki could reply. “Don’t worry, I’ll return him right away.”

“I don’t,” Thor started to say, but then the Grandmaster turned his bright-eyed gaze on Thor and he remembered himself, closing his mouth and glancing at Loki.

“You don’t need my permission, Grandmaster,” Loki said, though Thor caught a flicker of anxiety. The Grandmaster beamed.

“Of course not,” he said, laying a hand on Thor’s arm that he had to fight not to shake away. “Good boy.”

“I’ll be back soon,” Thor said, trying to sound reassuring.

“Sure, sure,” the Grandmaster said. “Now come on, Sparkles.”

Thor let himself be steered away, over towards the bar. “Drink?” The Grandmaster said. “No? Goodness, Sparkles, don’t you ever just...live a little? Oh well, I’m having one. Your loss.” He held up a finger toward the bartender. “So - so. What do you think of the party, hm?”

“It’s...nice,” Thor said carefully. The Grandmaster wrinkled his nose.

“*Nice*. Oof. You’re a - you’re a hard one to please, aren’t you, buttercup.”

“I don’t mean to offend,” Thor said quickly. “Eloquence is not my strong suit.”

“Offend! Who’s offended? Not me.” The bartender pushed a drink toward the Grandmaster, and he picked it up and sipped it. His hand was still resting on Thor’s arm, beginning to feel vaguely proprietary.

“Grandmaster,” Thor said, “I don’t wish to be abrupt, but was there something you particularly wished to discuss with me?”

“Yes,” the Grandmaster said. “Actually - mm, this is quite good, want to try?”

“Thank you, but no,” Thor said. The Grandmaster shrugged.

“Suit yourself. All right, Sparkles, the thing is - the thing is. I don’t know if you’ve *noticed*, but there’s been a bit of a...problem.”

“What sort of problem,” Thor asked warily. The Grandmaster turned more directly toward him.

“That’s it, though,” he said. “I don’t *know*. But *something* is wrong with Lo-lo and I *don’t* like it.”

Thor glanced quickly over his shoulder at Loki and just as quickly away, hoping Loki hadn’t noticed. “What do you mean,” he asked, though he knew very well what the Grandmaster probably meant, and *he* could guess easily enough what was going on. But he didn’t think that was what the Grandmaster wanted to hear.

The Grandmaster frowned at him. “Don’t play dumb with me, sweetheart,” he said. “I’m not falling for it. He’s all - *wilty*.”

Maybe, Thor thought with sudden hope, maybe this was a *good* thing. “I have noticed,” he said slowly, “that he seems a bit...dissatisfied.”

“Yes! Not at *all* like the, ah, *delightful* kitten I remember. And this is - you know, I *hate* to say it, Sparkles, but I think...I just have to think that you *did* something.”

“That I—” Oh, Thor thought. No, not a good thing at all. “What could I have done?”

“I don’t know,” the Grandmaster said, and his eyes were suddenly quite a bit more focused, his fingers on Thor’s arm a little tighter. “Why don’t you tell me?”

Thor’s lungs squeezed in sudden terror. He imagined the Grandmaster casting him out, barring him from Sakaar. Imagined him getting rid of Loki entirely because Loki wasn’t entertaining anymore. Imagined—

He shook his head hard. “Grandmaster,” he said, with all the sincerity he could summon, “I have not done anything. Truly.”

“I just don’t believe you, though,” the Grandmaster said, taking a small step closer to Thor.

“You’re - you’re awfully *devious*, aren’t you? And I think - I think maybe you being here is just making it...hard for Loki to really settle in, you know? I think maybe you’re *making* him...unhappy.”

It was so close to Thor’s own thoughts that it took his breath away. His fears, that he was just making things worse. But no, *no*, that wasn’t why Loki was miserable, not even the *half* of it.

“Why would I do that?” Thor asked. “All I want is for Loki to be well—”

“Well, I don’t *know*! Why *would* you do that, Sparkles? That’s what I’ve been trying to figure out. And I just can’t get my head around it.” The Grandmaster squeezed Thor’s arm. “So...help me out,

here. Why don't you just tell me why you're doing this to your own brother?"

"I'm not," Thor said, fear rising up in his throat like bile. The Grandmaster cut him off.

"I think maybe - I think maybe this has to do with how you don't *trust* me. That maybe you're, ah - poisoning him against me. Making him think I'm...that I don't have his best interests at heart."

Thor shook his head. The Grandmaster's fingers tightened a notch.

"I just - I'm not sure *what* to think, here! All I know is that - it's really cramping my *style*. Lo's just not - he's not *himself*, he doesn't seem to be having *any* fun, and it's - distressing! After everything I've done for him, and - and for *you*, and now...like I said, I *don't* like it." He sounded almost sulky, and Thor took as deep a breath as he could manage, hunting desperately for something to say that might appease the man.

"I think maybe - Grandmaster, is it possible he's just...lonely? Not that - of course your company is a great boon, but you have other duties as ruler. Loki may just be feeling...isolated."

The Grandmaster squinted at him. "Are you sweet-talking me, Sparkles?" Thor didn't formulate a response before he went on. "Besides - what do you mean, *isolated*! Look at all these people. A lot of them just *dying* to socialize with my *favorite* guest." He gestured, and Thor looked at Loki, indeed standing in a small knot of people - but to Thor's eye Loki just looked tense, almost on the verge of bolting. The urge tugged at Thor to pull away and walk over, pull Loki into his arms and shield him with his body.

"Of course," Thor said, "but he doesn't...*know* them."

The Grandmaster eyed him. "Are you - are you angling toward *asking* for something, sunshine? Now?"

"In the interest of helping with your problem," Thor said quickly. "Perhaps it might be good for Loki to see some more familiar faces. Other than you and me."

"Got someone in mind, have you?"

"Actually..." Thor swallowed. "Yes. Brunn- Scrapper-142."

The Grandmaster blinked. "Oh, *really*," he said. "She - goodness! That's - wow, that's awfully brazen of you - of *her*, after what she did. And now she wants to come back? That's..." He trailed off, and then shook his head and laughed. "Oh, that's just 142 all over, isn't it? Bold as brass." He sounded wistful, almost *fond*. "And she wants to drop by to visit Loki?"

"She asked if she might," Thor said carefully.

"Huh," the Grandmaster said. "I didn't think they liked each other much. Too many...mm. Too many prickles." He pursed his lips, narrowing his eyes at Thor. "You know what? All right."

It was all Thor could do not to expel the breath he'd been holding all at once. "You will permit it?"

"Hmm-mm. I'll allow it. See if...see if it helps perk Lo-lo up. Maybe you're onto something. *Maybe*." He let go of Thor's arm to pat him on the cheek. "I guess we'll just see, won't we?"

Thor clenched his teeth until he could master the urge to snap something rash and said simply, "we will indeed."

“Now let’s go deliver you back to your brother,” the Grandmaster said, slinging an arm around Thor’s shoulders; he tried not to shudder. “I want to make sure you get some quality time before I steal him away for the after party. Unless you wanted to come, I just assumed...” He arched his eyebrows.

Thor felt his face spasm. His desire to protect Loki, to not leave him alone, warred with the knowledge of what he would almost certainly have to watch if he went. Watch, and do nothing as his brother had sex with - was *raped* by - the being standing in front of him.

He felt sick at himself all over again, rage and guilt twisting in his gut, because he couldn’t think of a single damned thing he could do, and in the end he was a coward. “You assumed correctly,” he said, telling himself that Loki wouldn’t want him to be there, that it would only compound his shame. “I would rather not attend.”

“Honestly, glad to hear it,” the Grandmaster said, steering him away from the bar. “You’re - don’t take this the wrong way, but you’re kind of a spoilsport, Sparkles.”

Oh, yes, Thor thought bitterly. I’m a spoilsport, because I don’t want you taking advantage of my brother, because I can see you wearing him down when he’s already exhausted, because I find everything you are repulsive and I dearly wish I could kill you. He forced a smile. “I’m not much of one for parties, I suppose.”

“Maybe we just haven’t found the right one,” the Grandmaster said casually, which sent an odd shiver down Thor’s spine. “Here we are - I told you I’d have him back fast, kitten! Don’t look so *worried*.”

Loki scanned Thor’s face like he was looking for any changes, eyebrows furrowed, though his expression smoothed quickly into a smile he directed at the Grandmaster. “So you did. But one never knows what sort of trouble my brother might get into.”

“He *is* a troublemaker,” the Grandmaster said, relinquishing Thor. “Just like you, sweetheart.” He sauntered over to Loki and kissed him, sliding his hands down Loki’s sides. Thor forced his hands to unclench and glanced away. *Coward*. “See you later, honeybunch,” he heard through the roar in his ears, and made himself exhale slowly.

“Excuse me,” Loki said quietly, and then his fingers landed lightly on Thor’s arm - just where the Grandmaster’s had been. “Thor?”

His attempt at a smile strained his face. “It’s fine.”

“Don’t lie to me,” Loki said quietly. “Not now.”

Thor hesitated. “He accused me of doing something to make you unhappy,” he said, though he was tempted to insist that it really *was* fine.

“He thinks *you*-” Loki let out a strangled sound that made Thor wince. “Oh, no. It could have nothing to do with *everything else*, of course not, Norns forbid-” He cut off and swallowed hard, his shoulders that had begun to draw upwards slumping.

“I asked him about Brunnhilde visiting,” Thor said, deciding to leave off how he’d introduced the subject. “He agreed to the idea.”

Loki’s lips tugged at one corner. “Did he? That’s good, I suppose.” The energy had gone out of his voice, and he took a swallow from the glass he hadn’t been holding when Thor had left with the Grandmaster.

“He also asked if...he said there was going to be an *afterparty*.” Loki didn’t look surprised, and Thor added, “he invited me.”

“I assume you declined.” It wasn’t a question, and a knife twisted in Thor’s stomach.

“I - I can change that,” he said quickly. “If you want me to be there—”

“I wouldn’t ask it of you.”

“You could,” Thor said. “I would, for you. If it would help at all.”

“I don’t want *you* to go mad,” Loki said, and Thor did not miss the emphasis.

“Perhaps we can claim you are ill,” Thor said desperately. “That you can’t go.”

“Thor...” Loki looked like he wanted to rub his forehead and was just stopping himself. “It’s fine. I can manage this. And besides...” His smile was humorless, and he raised the glass he was holding. “If I drink enough of this I won’t remember a thing.”

The knife in Thor’s gut twisted deeper. He wished it were one of Loki’s in truth - it would, he thought, feel better. Easier to bear. *Please don’t hurt yourself*, he wanted to say. *Isn’t he doing enough of that?* “Loki,” he said, pained, but Loki looked away.

“Don’t,” he said. “Don’t look at me like that, don’t sound like that. It only makes it worse.”

“How?” Thor demanded. “How can my concern make it worse?”

“How can it not?” Loki’s voice sharpened, and for once Thor was almost relieved to hear it. “You keep me from being able to pretend that this is *fine*. You look at me like I am something pathetic, something *broken*, and I - *feel* it.”

Frustration burst hot in Thor’s chest. “Is there anything I can do right?” He asked, more harshly than he meant. Loki flinched, and Thor immediately felt rotten and low.

“Just go,” Loki said. “Leave. There’s no point in your staying here.” Thor’s eyes widened, panic kicking up, but Loki added after a brief pause, “I will see you back in our rooms.”

At least, Thor told himself, he wasn’t being sent away for good. It felt like little comfort in the moment. He clasped Loki’s head gently between his hands and kissed his forehead. “Please,” he said. “Take care of yourself.”

“Don’t I always?” Loki said, plainly trying for a light and airy tone, but his voice trembled precariously. *No*, Thor thought. *No, you don’t. You didn’t take care of yourself when the Kursed ran you through. You didn’t take care of yourself when you took on Thanos with a knife. You didn’t take care of yourself when you let go of Gungnir and fell into the abyss.*

You aren’t taking care of yourself now.

“Go on,” Loki said, giving him a little push and a strained smile. “I’ll be fine.”

No, Thor thought. *You won’t.*

But he was helpless. Utterly, completely, helpless.

Thor went from the party to look for a fight. He ended up asking a passing servant if there was

anywhere that he could go to hit things - not people, he hastened to clarify, when the servant gave him an alarmed look. He directed Thor to a room with a combat simulator - or at least, Thor thought that was what it was supposed to be.

His satisfaction was somewhat spoiled by the Grandmaster's voice commenting periodically to remark on his technique with things like "spectacular!" and "absolutely stunning!" But at least it was something, even if Thor couldn't find a way to make it generate opponents with the Grandmaster's face. Even if it lacked the proper impact of true physical combat.

When he'd worn off some of his energy, Thor retreated back to the room and stayed up waiting for Loki. He didn't return until the small hours of the morning, when Thor had begun to fear that something might have happened.

"You're awake," Loki said, his voice slurring as he blinked at Thor. "It's late. I mean - ha, early. Right?"

"You're drunk," Thor said wearily.

"Mm," Loki said, and grinned a little wildly. "Not anymore, actually. This is much better. Nothing *matters*. It's all just - it's like floating. Do you know what that's like?"

"Maybe you should lie down," Thor said. "Go to sleep--"

"No!" Loki said. "No, I'm not going to - that's *not* what I want to do. Sleeping is - *dangerous*. No, this is better. I feel *free*, Thor, do you know how long it's been since I felt like that?"

"This isn't freedom, Loki," Thor said, standing and walking over to him. Loki grabbed his arms, his face flushed, almost feverish. "This is just - a different kind of slavery. It's not real."

Loki's smile slipped slightly. "Nothing is," he said. "Or - I'm not sure. Maybe it is, maybe it isn't. Maybe this is all just - sparks my mind is throwing up as I die. Maybe I never escaped from the Void at all. And what is the difference, anyway? Real, not real - it's all a matter of perspective."

Thor shook his head. "That's not true," he objected. "This is real. *I'm* real. You're here, with me--"

"Am I? I thought that before, you know. I've dreamed - I dreamed of you coming for me when I first fell, as I came undone."

That knife between Thor's ribs again. He gripped Loki's shoulders. "Feel that?" He said, giving him a little shake. "I'm *here*. Truly here. You're just confused because you've been drugged--"

"I took it," Loki interrupted. "I knew what it was and I said *yes*, I let the Grandmaster put the pill on my tongue. You don't know - you don't understand Thor, what it's like living in my head. It's a trap, it's - it's like Thanos's fingers around my neck, choking me." He laughed. "See? I can say that, and not feel as though I am going to lose my mind. That *is* freedom. Not being - not being shackled to myself, and all the ways in which I am - broken."

"You aren't broken," Thor said, though he felt a little like he was breaking. "You *aren't*."

"Liar," Loki said. "It's all right, Thor. I know it, you know it - the Grandmaster knows it, and he likes me that way. At least, sort of. As long as he doesn't have to know I'm miserable."

"I don't know any such thing," Thor insisted, though hadn't he thought as much, or thought around it, afraid to admit that he did not know if Loki could come back from this whole? Loki gave him a look of such fond exasperation that it took his breath away.

“Ah, Thor,” he said. “You glorious idiot.” He swayed, stumbling a little toward Thor and catching himself on his chest. “I think this...this is as close as I can get to happy. And it’s nice. I really do feel like I could fly. And this is why - this is what makes the Grandmaster such a good ruler.”

“He doesn’t want you to be happy,” Thor said. “You must know that. He just wants you pliant and, and—”

“Obviously,” Loki said with a snort. “I *know* that. But the thing is - I *want* that, Thor. A part of me - it would be easier. It *is* easier. Surrendering. I’ve - so many people have owned me, after all: Odin, Thanos, the Grandmaster. You.”

Thor jerked. “I don’t *own* you, Loki. I am your *brother*.”

“Same thing,” Loki said with a wave of his hand, and Thor felt like he’d been punched.

“You don’t believe that,” he said.

“I do and I don’t,” Loki said. “One after another, sometimes both at once. Endless wheels turning in my head, and sometimes I just want it all to *stop*. Norns, Thor, you have no *idea* how exhausting it is.”

Thor swallowed hard. “I have never wanted to own you,” he said. Loki smiled at him again, giddy, his eyes overbright.

“You didn’t have to want it,” Loki said. “You just did. Do.”

Thor’s eyes and nose burned and he was going to cry. *Was* crying, and Loki’s smile faded. “Oh no,” he said. “Oh no, *Thor*, don’t be upset. It’s all right. Really, it’s all right.”

“It isn’t,” Thor said. “None of this is.”

“Shh,” Loki said soothingly. “Oh, Thor. This is just how it works.”

“It *shouldn’t* be,” he said. “It’s not *fair*. You should get to be happy—”

“I am happy,” Loki said serenely. “Weren’t you listening? I feel wonderful, Thor. *Clean*.”

“But it won’t last,” Thor said. “This - *drug* will wear off, and how will you feel then?”

Loki shrugged. “There’s always more.”

“You’re destroying yourself,” Thor said desperately. “Loki, *please*.”

Loki’s face fell, slowly. “Thor,” he said, “this is better. This is...” He took a shuddering breath. “Do you know what it’s like to feel - to feel the abyss yawning below you, and know how thin the wire you’re walking is? To be inches from falling, every second fighting to keep your balance and if you look down even for a moment...”

“I do,” Thor said, his voice hoarse. “It is what I felt after Thanos took everything. After he killed you. All that was left was vengeance, and if I stopped...”

Loki’s hands felt too warm on his skin. “I’m sorry,” he said, and he did sound sorry, *sincerely* sorry. “I did this to you.”

“No,” Thor said, voice raw. “*No*. Not you. Thanos. Nothing here is your fault.”

“Well,” Loki said, “arguably—”

“*Nothing*,” Thor insisted over him. “Loki - don’t you understand that I need you? *You*, not - not this. This isn’t you.”

“It could be,” Loki said.

“Is that what you want?” Thor asked, his voice trembling. “Truly? Do you want to be - to have your mind hollowed out, your wits addled?”

“Is that the price for a little peace?”

It isn’t worth it, Thor wanted to say, but what if it was? Maybe he was just being selfish, yet again, insisting that Loki sacrifice whatever scraps of happiness he could find, however illusory, for the sake of Thor’s comfort?

“It’s not up to me,” Thor said finally, though it felt like ripping something out of him to say it. “Is it? It isn’t up to me to decide for you.”

“You’re right,” Loki said. “It isn’t. Maybe it should be, though. I am not, historically, the best at making decisions for myself.” He smiled again, too brightly, and Thor ached in his whole body.

“I don’t know,” he said tentatively. “Why don’t you tell me what you want to do now, and we will see how it goes?”

What Loki wanted to do, mostly, was talk. He dragged Thor outside for a while, only to get restless and drag him back in, pacing around the room, gesturing wildly, veering from subject to subject. Only half of them wrenching and deeply personal. The rest...Loki knew a lot about a lot of things.

It took a couple hours for him to wind down, and then he crashed. Thor saw it happening and tried to ease Loki toward bed before he hit the real low, but didn’t quite make it in time: he wound up tucking in a Loki who was limp, exhausted, and crying silently. Thor sat next to him, exhausted himself, and stroked his hair.

“I always forget this part,” Loki mumbled, his voice blurry. “Where I just feel worse afterwards.”

“Close your eyes,” Thor said. “You need rest.”

“I think sometimes I could sleep forever,” Loki said, closing his eyes. Thor felt a chill.

“You’d get bored,” he said, trying to tease. Loki didn’t react, and Thor ran his fingers into his hair, dragging his fingers across his scalp. “Tomorrow I’ll go back to Midgard and fetch Brunnhilde,” he said. “We’ll come back together, and I’ll be quick enough that you’ll barely notice I’m gone.”

Loki just nodded. “All right,” he said listlessly. “I hope she isn’t expecting much.”

Thor moved his hand without thinking to clasp Loki’s neck, only to jerk away when he flinched, a pang shooting through him all over again. “She’ll just be glad to see you, I’m sure,” he said. When he heard the gentleness in his voice he feared Loki would reject it, but he just nodded again, not opening his eyes. Worry crawled into Thor’s ribcage and curled up there.

Brunnhilde’s visit would help. It had to. And maybe she would have thought of *something* Thor could actually *do*.

Because he was increasingly uncertain how long Loki could last like this.

Chapter 4

Chapter Notes

Please note that this chapter includes a scene with explicit sex of dubious consensual nature.

Thor left while Loki was still asleep, penning a brief note that he set on the pillow next to him and hoping that he could make it back before Loki woke.

He walked out of the city and into the trash heaps, almost hoping for someone to confront him, and called the power that would take him back to Midgard, and Asgard's settlement.

It was high noon, and he'd chosen to land a little way away so that he could take some time to recover himself on the walk back - though he feared his face would still show his weariness. Still, other than with Brunnhilde, he needed to try his best. He *should* contact the Avengers, his other friends, but if he wanted to get back quickly...

Thor realized that someone was sprinting toward him and stopped, starting to brace for an attack before realizing that he recognized the way the runner moved.

Thor dropped Stormbreaker just before Sif smashed into him at full speed, knocking him back a step. "Thor!" She said. "*There* you are, I finally get here and you've vanished--"

Vanished. So she didn't know, was Thor's guilty first thought, before he pushed it away in favor of embracing her, the only one of his oldest and dearest friends still living.

"Sif," he said, and the gratitude and relief he felt was entirely genuine. "You *live*."

"*You* do," she said, her eyes shining. "I wasn't certain, even though Brunnhilde told me - a *Valkyrie*, Thor, where did you find a real, living, Valkyrie?"

Thor shook his head. "It is a long story. Where have *you* been?"

"All over the place," Sif said. "Across the galaxy, here and there...for a while, trying to find a way back to Asgard. And then trying to find a way here. I heard...word reached me that Asgard had fallen, though no one seemed to know exactly what had happened. And shortly after that..."

She trailed off. Thor drew back, holding her at arm's length and scanning her face. "You're here now," he said. "That is what matters."

"Norns, Thor," she said. "It is good to see you."

"And you," Thor said, but it was sinking in, too, all that she didn't know. All that he had to tell her, now, and he didn't want to. As if she saw it in his face, Sif's smile faded.

"I heard about the Allfather," she said. "I am sorry, Thor. May his soul find peace in Valhalla."

Thor looked away. "Thank you," he said, though his feelings about his father now were...mixed at best. He took a deep breath. "What else have you heard?"

Sif's eyebrows furrowed. "Little," she said. "I only arrived yesterday - I managed to track down some teleportation technology on Hala and made the jump from there. I've been talking with Brunnhilde—" Thor couldn't help but smile a bit at the shine in Sif's eyes when she said her name - "—but she told me that I should wait until you came back." Her eyes flicked to Stormbreaker. "I take it there's a great deal for you to tell me."

Thank you, Brunnhilde, Thor thought. "There is," he said. "And too little of it good. Asgard was destroyed by—"

"Surtur," Sif said. "That much was clear."

"I unleashed him," Thor said plainly. Well - Loki had, but...Thor wasn't ready to touch that yet. Sif stared at him as though he'd gone mad. "To defeat Hela. My half-sister."

"Your *what*?"

"Odin had another child before me," Thor said. "Asgard's history is not what we thought it was. But that is...another conversation, I think. Suffice to say that she was freed from where Father had imprisoned her with his death, and sought to claim Asgard. She..." Thor breathed out slowly. "In the initial assault, she killed Fandral, Volstagg, and Hogun."

Sif rocked back, her eyes widening. "All of them?" She said, voice suddenly hoarse. Thor dipped his chin, and her face tightened. "When I did not find them here, I had hoped that..." Her jaw tightened, though Thor could see her lower lip tremble. "If I had been there - if the Allfather had not sent me away—"

"Likely you would be dead too," Thor interrupted. Sif looked away.

"Grief upon grief," she said quietly. "I had hoped for a more joyous homecoming."

She would ask him. Any moment, she would ask him. *Where were you?* He could lie. A part of him was tempted to lie. But no - Sif deserved better from him. "There is one other thing," he said. Sif glanced up, eyes full of dread.

"What is it?"

"It wasn't Odin," Thor said. "Who sent you away from Asgard."

"Thor," Sif said slowly, "I remember the conversation. He said he would be within his rights to have us all executed for treason—"

"I know," Thor said. "But it was Loki. Disguised as our father."

Sif's eyes widened. The anger came a moment later. "He deceived you? Pretended to perish and overthrew the Allfather—"

Thor shrugged, forcing a half smile though something in him lurched at *pretended to perish*. Thinking of the livid scar on Loki's chest; thinking, too, of clinging to Loki's limp body on the Statesman. "He was actually decent at it. A bit neglectful, perhaps, but—"

"How can you take this so casually?" Sif demanded, her cheeks reddening with temper. "That he would betray you again—"

"Sif," Thor interrupted, "he came to Asgard's defense. Fought with me against Hela. And when Thanos attacked our ship—" Thor's throat closed, and he forced himself onwards. "He stood with

me then, too. And Thanos killed him.”

The color drained out of Sif’s face. To his relief, she did not ask if he was sure. Perhaps something on his face spoke for him. “Oh,” she said, quieter.

“The last of my family,” Thor said. “Just as we began to mend things. And he died in front of me.”

Sif’s indignation drained away. She took a step toward Thor and laid a hand on his shoulder. “Thor...”

“There is more,” Thor said. “I could not bear it. I found a man - a *being* - of immense power. And he brought Loki back.”

Sif let go of his shoulder and took a step back. “Thor,” she said, too gently. “Perhaps we should...go back to your cabin, where we might discuss this further in private?”

“He isn’t mad,” Brunnhilde said, before Thor could say the same. “Or, well, maybe a little, but not *hallucinations* mad. I know the guy he enlisted, and he can do it.”

Sif looked back and forth between them, clearly overwhelmed, and torn between skepticism and her awe of one of the Valkyrie in the flesh.

“Sif,” Thor said, “I am sorry. I can’t stay for long, I only came to fetch Brunnhilde.”

“You don’t *fetch* me, Your Majesty,” she said. “I take it Gast agreed to let me come?”

Sif shook her head. “Fetch her where? Where are you going?”

Thor took a deep breath and let it out. “To see Loki,” he said. Sif’s lips thinned to a line and Thor tensed, prepared to defend himself, to defend *Loki*—

“Take me with you,” she said. Thor stared.

“I’m going to let you figure this out,” Brunnhilde said. “I need to go get my sword.”

“Why?” Thor asked, after a moment, and tried not to sound wary. Sif still straightened up like he’d accused her of something.

“Is it so surprising?” She asked.

“Last you saw him you threatened his life,” Thor said. “And a moment ago you were angry again. And now you wish...now is not the time for a confrontation, Sif. Loki is...not well.”

“That isn’t why I ask,” she said stiffly.

“Then why,” Thor said. Sif looked away.

“My family is gone,” she said, her voice suddenly softer. “My friends are gone. If what you say is true - if Loki is alive - then you and he are the only people who are left.” She raised her eyes back to Thor’s face. “Loki and I - we were friends, once,” she said. “I do still remember that.”

Thor felt...chastened, even though he did not think that was what Sif meant. He hadn’t thought of...fool that he was, he hadn’t thought of her family. That she would have returned here, not knowing if they still lived - and finding that Hela had killed them. Or Thanos had. To his shame, Thor didn’t know which it was.

You and he are the only people who are left. Thor knew - too well - what that was like.

He'd only asked the Grandmaster about one guest. Bringing two could be dangerous. But looking at Sif - the relief bled away, leaving only weariness and sorrow - he didn't want to leave her behind. And maybe it would help Loki, too, seeing a face known from better times, before...all of this.

Thor warred with himself. Possible risk versus possible benefit.

Brunnhilde walked up next to Sif. "So is she coming?" She asked.

"I only asked about you," Thor said.

"Odds are he won't even notice," Brunnhilde said. "As long as you don't draw attention to yourself."

"He?" Sif said.

"The Grandmaster," Thor said. "Ruler of a planet called Sakaar. He's the one who...brought Loki back. He is powerful, and capricious, and we do not exactly...get along."

Sif's determined expression faltered. "So you are leaving me here."

"Nah," Brunnhilde said, before Thor could respond. "Let's take her with, Thor. The more the merrier." Thor shot her a look and she half-smiled at him. "Might even help."

"All right," Thor said, though he was still reluctant. Thinking of Loki, Loki's - *fragility*. He and Sif hadn't parted on good terms, whatever she said now. If he reacted poorly to her presence...

But he'd already agreed. As much because of his guilt as because he actually believed it might be a good idea. He couldn't very well go back on his word now.

"How do we get there?" Sif asked, squaring her shoulders like she was about to go into battle.

"With that," Brunnhilde said, pointing at Stormbreaker. Sif's eyebrows furrowed.

"An axe?"

I sent the commission a while ago. Mjolnir was a mighty weapon, but I thought you might need something sharper. Thor's smile felt pained.

"It's a very special axe."

"What *is* this place," Sif said, her eyes almost bugging out of her head as Thor walked them toward where he expected to find the Grandmaster - hoping Loki wouldn't be with him. He doubted he would be so lucky.

Thor shook his head. "A strange one," he said lowly. Brunnhilde snorted.

"He's being polite," she said. "It's a literal trash heap. Not just outside, either. And it doesn't look like it's changed at all. I suppose it wouldn't, as long as Gast doesn't want it to."

Sif's eyebrows furrowed. "How did you find your way *here*?"

"We fell," Thor said. "Loki and I. Hela knocked us out of the Bifrost, and we landed here."

Sif looked at Brunnhilde, whose face went stony. "This is where the dregs of the universe go," she said. "The fucked up. Guess I fit the bill."

Sif opened her mouth, but Thor knocked her with his elbow and she shut it again, though still frowning at Brunnhilde. *She's not what I expected of a Valkyrie either*, Thor wanted to say. *But she's everything one should be, and more*. He wouldn't, though. Not in front of Brunnhilde.

Thor paused down the hall from where he could hear familiar music and the Grandmaster's laughter. "It's probably best you speak as little as possible," he told Sif, who briefly looked like she might object but simply nodded. Thor hesitated, and then said, "there is a possibility that Loki may be here."

Brunnhilde shot him a quick look. "I'd say a certainty," she said. "He likes his pets close."

Thor twitched. "Don't say that word," he said harshly. Sif's eyes had widened.

"*Pets*? Is that—"

"The situation is complicated," Thor said, sick at himself for not saying more. Not being *able* to say more. "Just...keep quiet for now." He turned and went in, expecting that they would follow.

As usual, the Grandmaster was easy to find. And Brunnhilde had been right: Loki wasn't far away. Not far at all - the Grandmaster had a hand on the back of Loki's neck as he chatted with a woman of indeterminate species. Thor thought of the way Loki flinched when *he* moved to touch him there, a gesture as familiar between *them* as breathing, and he wanted to tear the Grandmaster's hand off at the wrist. He heard Sif's hissed exhale behind him.

Thor took a deep breath and steeled himself, starting toward them. As if he sensed their approach, the Grandmaster turned, and Loki with him. Thor saw Loki's fingers tighten around the stem of the glass he was holding, the flick of his eyes from Thor to past Thor and slight tensing of his jaw before all expression vanished under a pleasant mask.

Drawing closer, Thor could see the slight tremor in his hand. At least there were no new piercings.

Not visible, anyway, Thor's thoughts supplied, and he hated that he'd thought of it. Hated the idea that it might be true. The Grandmaster, however, smiled. Always smiling, Thor thought. He pictured, again, driving his fist into those gleaming teeth and feeling them break.

"Look who it is!" He said brightly. "Is that - my favorite Scrapper, back from...wherever you ran off to. That was so *rude*, you know, I was just - so *hurtful*."

"What can I say," Brunnhilde drawled. "I'm just a free spirit." Thor tensed, but the Grandmaster laughed.

"Oh, *you*. When I heard Sparkles here wanted to bring you along, I thought - wow, *really*? But you know, I - I can admire that kind of audacity. You were always so adorably *brazen*, weren't you?"

Brunnhilde shrugged. "No one but you would ever describe me as adorable, Grandmaster." Her eyes moved sideways. "Hey, Loki," she said, admirably casual. "Nice to see you again."

Loki's sudden laugh was brittle, full of sharp edges. "Pleasantries? From you?"

"Hey," she said. "I'm here, aren't I?"

"Don't be rude, kitten," the Grandmaster said mildly, but his eyes had moved to Sif. "And - ah,

who's this? I don't remember you mentioning bringing someone else along, Sparkles." There was faint reproach in his voice.

"It was unexpected," Thor said. "She is an old friend, and asked if she might visit as well." He forced himself to add, "I am sorry I didn't ask first."

The Grandmaster pursed his lips. "We-ell," he said, but then Loki turned a little toward him, laying a hand on his arm.

"It is hardly as though she can do any harm," he said. "And I'm sure she won't stay long."

The Grandmaster raised his eyebrows. "Do *you* want her to stay, sweetheart? That's, ah...that's what matters, here."

"Of course," Loki said. "I am looking forward to spending some...quality time with them. In fact, if I may..."

"Mm. You want to go socialize?" The Grandmaster's smile was indulgent. "All right, all right. I can't have you all to myself all the time." The hand on the back of Loki's neck squeezed, and Thor saw Loki's hand spasm, the slight hitch quickly controlled, before the Grandmaster pulled his hand away. "Go on, then. And, um..." His eyes slid to Thor, and he lowered his voice as though that meant Thor wouldn't hear him. "Drop by later, hmm? For some *quality time* of our own."

Loki's smile looked sick to Thor's eyes. "Of course," he said. Then turned and said, "shall we?" somewhere to the left of Thor's shoulder, and swept toward the door. Thor glanced at the Grandmaster, who smiled at him.

"Stop by and catch up before you go, 142!" He said cheerfully.

"We'll see," she said, which made the Grandmaster laugh again.

Loki was waiting out in the hallway, his expression stony. Thor just managed not to wince, already preparing himself for a tongue lashing, but Loki just said, "shall we go somewhere else? I don't fancy being eavesdropped upon by more ears than necessary." He turned on his heel and began walking away. Valkyrie gave him a sidelong look before following; Thor started to join her and then realized Sif was standing still in her place.

She shook herself when Thor looked at her and followed as well.

Loki didn't take them far - just a bit down the hallway to a more private room, where Loki strode straight to the bar, then glanced at Thor and checked himself, simply taking a glass of water. Valkyrie, on the other hand, was less restrained.

"I missed *these*," she said enthusiastically, and picked up an entire bottle. Thor frowned at her, and she sighed and poured a glass instead with a muttered, "spoil-sport."

Sif was apparently unable to restrain herself any longer and burst out with "what in the Nine was *that*?"

Loki's fingers tightened around the glass and then relaxed. He didn't look at Thor, but Thor could *feel* his displeasure.

"I thought I would leave it to you how best to explain," he said weakly.

"How generous of you," Loki said, his voice so tight it almost shook. "How very *thoughtful*. I

notice you didn't mention you were bringing her."

"It was a surprise," Thor said. "She only just found her way back to Midgard."

Loki's smile was nasty. "Ah, yes," he said. "I did send her on *quite* the pointless chase. And being the loyal creature she is, naturally—"

"Don't change the subject," Sif interrupted, though there was a sour note in her voice. "That - the Grandmaster—"

"Yes," Loki said, "I *am* his - concubine? Toy? Pet? Choose your word." Sif recoiled physically, and Loki smirked, sharp and unpleasant. "Shocked, are you? I would have expected you to find it perfectly in line with your opinion of me."

Sif opened her mouth and then closed it, seemingly at a loss for words. This had been a mistake, Thor thought miserably. He should have left her behind. Loki was going to goad her into a temper - Thor wasn't certain *why*, but he could see it coming, and see Loki winding tighter by the second.

"Sif asked to come," Thor said, hoping it would make a difference.

"I'm sure she did," Loki said, lip curling. "After all, I betrayed you - what is it, now, twice since she last saw me? I believe she was fairly clear about what the result of such a trespass would be." He spread his arms wide, his head tilted back. "Well?"

"Loki," Thor said, suddenly alarmed, and Valkyrie stepped forward.

"Don't be dramatic," she said.

"It is my natural state," Loki said, not looking at her.

Sif shook her head, seeming to recover herself. "I am not going to harm you, Loki," she said. "Too much has been lost already."

"Not to mention that Thanos got there first," Loki said lightly, but Thor saw the brief tremor in his hands and took a step toward him. Sif's expression was somewhere between horror and anger. She shook her head again.

"We were friends," she said. "I have - what injuries lie between us, I have let them go."

"So kind of you," Loki said. "I graciously accept your apology."

"I didn't—" Sif cut herself off and looked at Thor, something helpless in her expression.

"Hey," Brunnhilde said. "Lay off."

"And *you*," Loki said, but then he just seemed at a loss. She half-smiled at him.

"Yeah," she said, more quietly than Thor expected. "Me." She studied him a moment, then said, "I told Thor not to do it, you know. Bring you back. Kind of figured it'd just be a clusterfuck."

Loki's laugh was brittle. "You weren't wrong," he said, and Thor flinched again.

"Sure," Brunnhilde said. "He's a dumbass sometimes."

Loki stared at her, something strange in his expression, the anger fading away. "So he is," he said, and then half smiled. "I take it you've been looking after him?"

"I'm right *here*," Thor said.

"It's not right," Sif burst out, seemingly out of nowhere. "It isn't - why haven't you *done* something?" It wasn't entirely clear if that was directed at Thor or at Loki.

"There isn't much that can be done," Loki said, and now he just sounded tired. "Thor agreed that if the Grandmaster brought me back to life I would stay here. Forever. He isn't exactly an easy man to countermand."

"I would think that *you*," Sif started to say.

"Why, Lady Sif," Loki said. "Is that actual appreciation of my skills?"

She reddened. "It isn't right," she repeated. "You shouldn't..." She shuddered. Loki just looked at her, and his shoulders dropped.

"It is what it is," he said, after a moment, and then looked away. "I am...relieved to know you are still alive."

Sif's jaw tightened and then she closed the distance between them and embraced Loki forcefully. He stood perfectly still, staring wide-eyed at Thor over her shoulder; Thor tried for an encouraging smile, and Loki's eyes closed.

"Sif," he said, and then stopped, apparently uncertain of what else he wanted to say. Brunnhilde cleared her throat.

"When you're done," she said, "want to go for a walk, Loki? I want to see everything that hasn't changed." Thor gave her a slightly perplexed look that she ignored; Loki opened his eyes and looked again to Thor, and then to Brunnhilde.

"All right," he said slowly, like he was waiting for someone to object. "If you like."

"I do like," she said.

Sif let go, though she looked even more uncertain of what she should do now. Loki looked at her, and scoffed a little, a little twist of a smile turning the corner of his lips. "Whatever apology you are thinking of making," he said, "you can keep it. I do not require that you abase yourself."

"Is it abasement to admit one's faults?" Sif said stiffly.

"I died, Sif," Loki said blandly. "I would consider the slate wiped clean." He turned toward Brunnhilde. "Shall we?"

"Sure thing," she said. Loki cast a look in Thor's direction, and Brunnhilde clapped him on the shoulder. "Don't worry," she said. "I think Thor can manage not to get himself in trouble for a half an hour."

"You would be surprised," Loki murmured, but he set down his glass and went with her. Thor watched his hands, and so he noticed that the slight tremor he'd noticed before was still there.

Sif stared after their exit, clearly at a loss. Thor cleared his throat, but before he could talk she rounded on him.

"What are we going to do?" She asked, almost aggressive. Thor glanced away.

"What do you mean," he asked, even though he knew the answer.

“What do I - isn't it *obvious*? What are we going to do to get Loki away from here?”

A small part of Thor was gratified that she so quickly turned to Loki's defense. He remembered that from when they'd all been young: how fiercely the two of them would snap at each other only to come instantly to the other's defense against anyone else. But mostly it was overwhelmed by miserable shame.

“Nothing,” Thor said. And then added, because he had to, “at least, not yet.”

Sif fairly goggled at him. “*Nothing?*”

“There is...” Thor opened and closed one fist and made himself say it. “There is nothing I can do.”

Sif shook her head. “That's not true. Between the four of us—”

Thor began to appreciate what Loki must feel when Thor insisted that there must be a way out. “It isn't that simple,” he said. “The Grandmaster is too powerful.”

“We have fought powerful enemies before,” Sif insisted. Thor felt his face spasm.

“If Loki leaves this planet he dies,” he said. Sif's jaw set.

“But—”

“I'm *trying*,” Thor said. “Do you think I'm not? Do you think that I am *content* with this state of affairs? I know what being trapped here is doing to him. And I can't do a *Norns-damned thing*.” Thor heard his voice rising to a near shout. “If I try - it's likely he'll be *punished* somehow, because of me. If he doesn't do something drastic to me as well, or even just cast me off this planet and refuse to let me return.”

Some of the anger faded slowly out of Sif's expression, but not the determination. “There must be *something*.”

“I am trying,” Thor said. “Believe you me, I am *trying*.”

Sif shook her head. “He's not really...Loki was exaggerating when he said...”

Don't ask me that question, Thor thought. Sif looked for a moment like she might be sick, and glanced toward the door where Loki and Brunnhilde had exited.

“She was here too?” She said, sounding desperate to change the subject. “When you found her? The - Brunnhilde.”

“Yes,” Thor said. “She was...lost. When we left for Asgard, she joined us. Me and Bruce Banner. Loki came later, with the ship for the evacuation.” He could not help but feel the need to remind her of that again, even if Sif had shown no inclination toward anger with Loki since seeing him.

Sif's frown didn't ease. “This is a disgusting place.”

“You will get no disagreement from me,” Thor said wearily. “But...but it was the one lead I had to bring Loki back to me.” He could hear the desperate note in his own voice. The need to express that this had all been *necessary*, and have someone believe him - someone else say *yes, Thor, it was worth it*.

You aren't to blame for making a mistake that's killing Loki slowly all over again.

"I understand," Sif said. "You are not at fault for what that monster does."

Am I at fault for letting it happen? Thor thought. *Am I at fault for being too much of a coward to try to stop it?* It was what he'd wanted to hear, and yet Thor found he could not accept it. Could not believe it.

"Thank you, Sif," he said dully. She stepped toward him, grabbing his shoulders.

"I will help you find a way," she said, which was when Loki and Brunnhilde returned. Loki looked, Thor noted, perhaps a little lighter than he had when he'd left, and when Brunnhilde walked in she flashed Thor a smile that seemed - at least possibly - encouraging. Of course, Loki's expression fell somewhat when he glanced at Sif.

"Pray do not look at me like that," he said. "I have no desire for your pity."

"It isn't pity," Sif said.

"Whatever it is. I do not want it." Loki ran his fingers through his hair. "I would sooner you threatened me again."

"I am not going to threaten you," Sif said stoutly. The look Loki gave her was profoundly tired, and her expression wavered. "Loki..." She glanced at Thor, looking helpless.

"What do you want of me, Sif," Loki asked quietly. She shook her head.

"I do not *want*..." She trailed off, seeming to reconsider. "I told Thor," she said. "Volstagg, Hogun, and Fandral are all dead. My family - my family is as well. The two of you are all I have of...home."

"That must be disappointing," Loki said. "Or at least half."

"Loki," Thor said reproachfully.

"Do not *Loki* me," Loki said to him, and then raised a hand and pinched the bridge of his nose. "This was a mistake. I am not fit company."

"That isn't true," Thor objected.

"Don't be generous, Thor," Loki said. "I *can* hear myself." He dropped his hand and looked away. "Besides, there is an...*occasion* tonight, and none of you want to attend."

"I came all the way here," Brunnhilde said. "I'm not turning around and running back because you're a little prickly."

"You've been worse company," Sif said, apparently trying for humor. Loki's eyebrows rose a fraction, gaze sliding sidelong in her direction.

"Have I."

"That cave in Alfheim," Sif said. "With the trolls."

After a long pause Loki huffed something that was almost a laugh. "That was an...unfortunate incident."

"Thor's fault, if I recall," Sif said.

“Most things were.” Loki glanced at Thor with the very faintest of smiles. Thor smiled back, though his heart still ached; it seemed to show, because even that faint smile faltered and Loki looked away. “Well,” he said, “if you want to remain here, I cannot stop you. Though I would still...ask that you refrain from joining the festivities this evening.”

Thor looked down. Brunnhilde made a faint noise in the back of her throat.

“Sorry,” she said. “I think I’m going to have to be there.” Thor looked up and caught the stricken look on Loki’s face. “Look, I’d rather not either,” she said. “But Gast said he’d ‘like’ me to come, and we both know what that means.”

Loki’s jaw worked and he glanced away. “I’m aware, yes.”

“I’ll keep my distance,” Brunnhilde said, almost gently. Loki twitched.

“Don’t try,” he said.

“Yeah,” she said after a moment. “Fair point.” Thor shifted.

“If you’d like for me,” he started, but Loki gave him a sharp look. “No,” he said, and then to Sif as well, “you either. Don’t - just don’t. You’d only make things worse.” It was blunt, and a little harsh, and Thor was ashamed of the fact that it was a relief.

“Is there anything I *can* do?” Sif blurted out, voice almost angry. Thor tensed, but Loki just huffed a humorless laugh.

“I would say ‘not unless you can bully the Grandmaster into letting me go,’ but you would probably try.” His smile stretched, grim and humorless. Sif looked like she wanted to argue and just didn’t know how, and after a moment the grotesque smile fell away. “Sit down,” he said with a loose gesture. “If you are going to stay, you may as well make yourselves comfortable. Or as comfortable as possible. I’ll call for some refreshments.”

“Loki,” Sif said.

“Don’t,” Loki interrupted, turning away. “Whatever you are thinking of saying...don’t. I’ll be back in a moment.” He slipped out, near silently.

“Well,” Brunnhilde said after a moment, draining the rest of her glass in one swallow. “This is going to be fun, isn’t it?”

When the time came, Brunnhilde and Loki departed together, leaving Sif and Thor by themselves. Sif paced back and forth, visibly struggling and clearly uncertain of what she was supposed to do. Thor just watched her wearily, unable to muster the energy for agitation like hers.

“Sif,” he said eventually, “sit down. You are making *me* tense.” As though he wasn’t already.

“How are you so calm?” She asked. Thor shook his head.

“I am not,” he said. “I only...I am saving my energy for other battles.” Like caring for Loki when he returned. Getting him water, putting him to bed, and staying like he could fend off nightmares by sitting close by.

Sif exhaled through her nose. “I can’t stay here,” she said. Thor frowned, and she added, “I don’t mean that - I am not asking if I can leave. Only that I need to move, need to walk.” She barked a

laugh. "I would kiss a troll for a good bar fight."

"You might find someone here to take you up on that," Thor said, but it came out weak. He could see the concern in Sif's expression, the wavering hesitation, and raised a hand. "Go on."

"Would you like to join me?" She asked after a brief pause. "You seem as though you could use the distraction."

He certainly wanted it. At the same time, he didn't feel he deserved it. "No, but thank you," he said. "I should be here when..." He trailed off. Sif glanced toward the door like she was reconsidering leaving, and Thor forced a smile. "Don't force yourself to remain on my account," he said. "In truth, I think I could use a little solitude."

"If you say so," Sif said, though she still sounded dubious.

"Be careful," Thor said. She gave him a strained smile of her own.

"Of the two of us," she said, "who has always been more inclined to rash behavior?"

"I have grown older and wiser since my misspent youth," Thor said. He meant it as a jest, sort of, but when he said it he didn't feel that way. When he looked back at that youth now, more often than not he just wanted to shake him until his teeth rattled. *Grow up*, he would snarl. *Look around you. Don't you see all that you are going to lose?*

"You have," Sif said, her voice more serious. Thor sighed.

If only it hadn't taken so long, and come with so much grief. "Thank you, Sif."

She gave him an awkward nod and turned to go, leaving Thor alone. He eyed the bar in the corner of the room and made himself turn away with a sigh, instead going to take a long and slightly too hot shower. After some hesitation, he let himself into Loki's room.

He didn't know what he expected to find, but it wasn't anything particularly interesting. If he'd hoped for some sort of diary that might give some insight into his brother's thoughts, he didn't find one - Thor supposed that even if he had, it would be wrong to look at it. Loki had always treasured his privacy, and now he had almost none of it.

There were no personal touches, of course. Nothing *personal*, nothing of *Loki's*, and Thor felt a wave of unexpected grief. He'd brought Loki back to life, but he wasn't truly living.

Thor swallowed the lump in his throat and left the room, closing the door behind him. He occupied himself - or tried - by watching a video projected on one of the walls, which was mildly entertaining until he realized it was an elaborately staged retelling of the founding of Sakaar by the Grandmaster.

That soured the experience enough that he turned it off entirely and went back to chasing his own thoughts in circles.

After some time - Thor wasn't certain how long it had been - there was a knock on the door. Thor almost dashed over, worst case scenarios flickering rapidly through his mind, but it wasn't a guard there to tell him any of the possible terrible things he'd imagined. Just Brunnhilde, raising a half-empty bottle in his direction.

"Here," she said. "Thought you might need some."

After a moment, Thor took it and drank. It burned going down enough that he could barely taste anything else, but he was still grateful.

“Thank you,” he said. Brunnhilde lifted one shoulder and let it drop.

“You’re welcome. I didn’t even have to pay for it.” She shouldered her way past him and dropped onto the couch, her head falling back so she was staring up at the ceiling.

“How did it...go,” Thor asked, full of dread. She stared at him for several long moments, then grimaced.

“It went,” she said. “I’ve been to worse. Managed to sneak out early, probably because he apparently still likes me. Don’t ask me why, I have no idea,” she added when Thor opened his mouth.

“And Loki?” Thor made himself ask.

“He was there,” Brunnhilde said. Thor kept looking at her, and she swore. “Do you really want me to say more than that, Thor? I’m not going to help you self-flagellate, and I get the impression besides that Loki’d rather you didn’t know too many sordid details about his life here.”

Thor jerked, and then looked away, ashamed. “Oh,” he said. “I...understand.” *I just want to know if he is all right*, he thought, but he knew the answer without asking. The best he could hope for was *no worse*.

Brunnhilde sighed. “He was still standing when I left,” she said. “Does that help?”

Not really. “How did you do it?” Thor asked. “How did you manage to live here, all that time, and not go mad?”

“Maybe I did, a little.” Brunnhilde sighed. “I guess it just used to be that I tried not to let myself get sober enough to notice.”

They sat next to each other in silence, Thor’s stomach in knots.

“When you were gone with him earlier,” Thor said eventually. “What did you talk about?”

“None of your business,” Brunnhilde said smoothly. She drummed her fingers on her leg. “Fuck. Dammit. You know this already, but he’s really...not doing great. Showing the wear. I’ve seen it happen before.”

“Happen before?” Thor said nervously.

“To contenders, usually,” Brunnhilde said. “They’d just...some of the better ones, they’d get tired. One day they’d just stop fighting.”

Thor’s stomach lurched, thinking of the look on Loki’s face as he’d let go of Gungnir. Exhausted, empty, resigned. Like he’d glimpsed a few times now.

“His favorites, too,” Brunnhilde said. “The lucky chosen. They’d get...used up, eventually. The Grandmaster could drag them along for a while, though. Until he got bored. Same with the arena. He never gets rid of anyone until he decides he’s done with them.”

“Loki’s not...” But no, Thor couldn’t deny it. He could see it easily, painfully, and resent it as much as he might that did not change anything. Did not *help*.

“Why tell me this,” Thor asked, his voice coming out harsh. “You are right. I *do* know it already. And I don’t know what to do.”

Brunnhilde rubbed her forehead. “Fuck,” she said again. “You’re going to need to get him out of here.”

“I *know*,” Thor said. “What do you think I’ve been *trying* to figure out?”

“Don’t *yell* at me,” she said. “I know. But - fuck.” She pressed the heels of her hands into her eyes, and Thor squeezed his closed.

“There must be *something*,” he said desperately. Then took a breath and made himself speak the words. “Maybe if *I* went to the Grandmaster and...and made him an offer to...” Take his place? Thor couldn’t quite make himself say it. Bile rose up just thinking about it, but for Loki’s sanity, Loki’s *life*...could he really do anything less?

Brunnhilde shook her head. “Wouldn’t work,” she said. “He knows he’s got you on a string, and he doesn’t want to let go of Loki. No, only way to cut Loki loose would be to convince him that he wants to, or find someone who can make him.”

“Like who?” Thor said, lunging after the second possibility with fervent desperation. “Is there someone who could?”

Brunnhilde opened her mouth and then closed it. Thor recognized the look on her face as one that meant she’d realized something, but wasn’t sure if she wanted to share it. Thor’s breath caught. “What?” He asked. “*Is* there?”

“I don’t know,” Brunnhilde said after a moment. “I think...my memory’s shit. I don’t remember whole *chunks* of my time here. But I think - I *think* - I remember Gast muttering about his brother ‘ruining his fun.’”

Thor tried to quash the sudden hope rearing its head in his chest. “His brother,” he said, thoughts racing. Jumping to a name he’d heard no more than once or twice, but still - “could that be the Collector?”

Immediately, his heart sank. Brunnhilde pressed her lips together.

“Maybe? Kind of rings a bell. He called him ‘Taneleer.’ I think. But the naming convention would fit.”

Thor looked down, shaking his head. “If it was him...he was probably killed. According to Gamora and her crew, he held the Reality Stone when Thanos went to get it.”

Brunnhilde shifted slightly, one of her knees bouncing up and down. “Well,” she said. “I hate - *really* hate - to give you any stupid ideas, but...people like him and the Grandmaster don’t kill easily.”

That bubble of hope started inflating again and Thor fought against it. “You think he might have survived?”

She shrugged. “I don’t know, Thor. And even if he *did* - you see how it turned out the last time you made a deal with one of these guys. What would you offer this time? He’s not like the Grandmaster - he wants *things*. Valuable objects - or people. So what would you give him? The last of Asgard’s royal line?”

“Maybe he would take the chance just to irritate his brother,” Thor said without hope. Brunnhilde gave him a flat stare, and Thor looked away. “I don’t know. But I know that...Loki cannot live like this. And I cannot live with it. There must be another way. And unless you have an idea of how I can convince the Grandmaster that keeping Loki would no longer be to his favor...” Brunnhilde said nothing, and Thor nodded. “Then I have to try.”

“Of course you do,” she said, shaking her head. “Though if you’ll take a recommendation: I might mention this to Loki before you do anything.”

Thor wavered. “He’ll think it’s too risky.”

“And he wouldn’t necessarily be wrong,” she said. Thor stiffened, and she held up her hands. “It *is* risky, Thor. And it could end very badly. Don’t you think Loki deserves a say? He didn’t get one last time. And he isn’t getting a lot of choices now.”

The only difference between you and him was your opinion on how I am to be disposed of, Thor remembered Loki saying. Brunnhilde was right. Thanos had stolen Loki’s life; Thor had dragged him back and given him to the Grandmaster. The Grandmaster wasn’t interested in what Loki wanted.

And if he refuses? If he tells you not to do it? Will you let it go, if he asks it of you? Do nothing, continue to watch him decline—

“I’ll ask,” Thor said.

“Good call.” Brunnhilde leaned back on her hands, and Thor fidgeted.

“Did he say...” Thor paused, and tried again. “Did he say anything about me? Is he angry with me for...”

Brunnhilde gave him a sharp look. “I thought I said it was none of your business,” she said. Thor just looked at her plaintively, and she sighed. “No, he didn’t say. But I don’t think so. If anything, I think he’s scared of driving you away.”

“Driving me—” Thor cut off, remembering Loki’s broken sobs. *I thought you were gone. I thought you’d left me here.* “That’s ridiculous,” he said vehemently, as though he were responding to Loki himself. Brunnhilde shrugged.

“Just saying it’s a guess.”

I wonder what he’d say if he knew that I still battle with fear every time he’s out of my sight, half certain that I’ll blink and he’ll be gone again. Dead again. Thor shook himself. “Well, he’s wrong.”

“I didn’t say he wasn’t,” Brunnhilde said, holding up her hands as if to defend against him. “This is probably another one of those conversations you should have with your actual brother instead of me, don’t you think?”

In that tone, it wasn’t really a suggestion. Thor looked toward the door.

“I’m going to stay up waiting for Loki,” he said. “If you want to sleep, or...anything...”

Brunnhilde hesitated, then said, “you know there’s a possibility he’s not coming back tonight.”

“There’s a possibility he is,” Thor said staunchly. “And I want to be here, and awake, if he does.”

“Fair enough.” She stood up. “I’m going to go check on your friend.”

“Be kind to her,” Thor said. “She has plunged into the deeps in the last half-a-day.”

“I’m always kind,” Brunnhilde drawled, but when Thor looked at her made a bit of a face. “Don’t worry. I’ll be nice. Even if the hero worship grates a little. Hopefully she’ll get over it fast.”

“She will,” Thor said. “Sif has never suffered fools well.”

“Well, that’s - *hey*,” Brunnhilde said, and Thor grinned at her. She threw a wide punch it was easy to dodge. “Apparently she suffered *you* for some centuries.” She jabbed a finger in his direction. “Watch it, Your Majesty.”

He held up his hands in an echo of her earlier gesture. “I am watching,” he said. She scowled at him before exiting.

Thor’s smile fell away when the door closed. He bowed his head and heaved a heavy, exhausted, sigh, suddenly weary in his bones.

But if Loki came back - he needed to be here. Needed to be awake. *If*. That word itched at him, chewed at him, providing endless possible scenarios in which he wouldn’t, the best of which was the Grandmaster dragging him off to violate Loki further. The worst of which involved gruesome visions of Loki’s death as his restraint finally broke.

Though of course, a melancholy part of Thor murmured, it might be that the latter would be better, in the end. Loki would regain some pride, some agency, slivers of control over his fate (before all were snuffed out forever). Perhaps Loki himself would find it a relief. He could regain Valhalla, see their mother again. Free of misery and pain.

And Thor would be alone. The very thought made his throat close and his heart squeeze. *Selfish*, he thought savagely, but it changed nothing about how he felt. He still sat, and thought of how it had been when Loki had been dead, and did not believe that he could live with that feeling again. There had to be another way. He had to find it.

And until then, Loki had to stay alive.

Loki did come back, very late at night. On his own, and he looked sober, if exhausted and like he was barely keeping his feet. Thor jerked up from where he’d been brooding.

“You needn’t have stayed up,” Loki said, hanging back by the door like he didn’t want to approach.

“I wanted to make sure you were safe,” Thor said.

Loki let out a faintly hysterical sounding laugh. “Of course I’m not,” he said. “No one here is ever safe.” He looked away and started chewing on his lip - another nervous habit Thor hadn’t seen in a long time. “I am sorry.”

“Why are you sorry?” Thor asked. Loki jerked, and then twitched one shoulder up.

“I’m sure there is something.”

Thor shook his head. “What upsets me most right now...is nothing you need apologize for.”

Loki pressed the heels of his hands against his eyes and took an uneven breath. “Thank you for

saying so.”

“It’s true,” Thor insisted. “None of this is your fault.”

“I would almost rather it were,” Loki said, his voice thick with disgust. “At least then I would have chosen to be - *ruined*. That’s what it was when I - played this game before.”

That casual mention sent a flash of hideous lightning through Thor, but he couldn’t focus on it now. “This isn’t a game,” Thor protested.

“With him, everything is.” Loki’s hands dropped from his face and he looked at Thor with misery carved in every line of his expression, and Thor couldn’t stand it. He lurched forward, then stopped himself.

“May I...” He held out his arms. Loki nodded, barely, and Thor pulled him in and felt Loki shudder. After a moment he almost collapsed against him, and Thor could feel the aftershocks of not-quite-sobs ripple through his body.

The ache in Thor’s chest spread to his stomach. He waited until Loki quieted, eyes open and staring at the wall opposite.

“I talked to Brunnhilde,” he said finally. Loki said nothing, and Thor continued carefully. “About...what we might be able to do.”

“Thor,” Loki said, profoundly tired, profoundly unhappy. “I thought I asked...”

“I can’t do *nothing*,” Thor interrupted. “I cannot stand by and watch you suffer. Please don’t ask me to. Besides, I would not bring this up if I didn’t think it was worthwhile. If I didn’t believe it could work.”

Loki sighed heavily. “Believe what could work,” he said, like he was reciting a line.

“Brunnhilde said there is another being like him that she knows of,” Thor said, trying to sound more confident than he felt. “And that he has apparently in the past been known to overrule the Grandmaster. He is called—”

“The Collector,” Loki said. “Yes. I know.”

“You—” Thor blinked “How do *you* know?”

“I read very obscure books,” Loki said, pulling away, his expression blank. “I sent him the Reality Stone when I was Odin, thinking there would be no one better to guard it. Clearly...” His voice shook a little briefly, then steadied. “Clearly I was incorrect. I’d assumed he was dead, but of course he would have ways of getting around that.”

Thor hadn’t expected Loki to know anything about this being, but he refused to be thrown by the lack of interest in Loki’s voice. “It seems likely,” he said. “And if he lives...he could, perhaps, be persuaded to intervene.”

Loki shook his head. “No.”

Thor had expected Loki to hesitate - but he hadn’t expected a direct refusal so quickly. “Loki—”

“I said no,” Loki said. “You’ve made one bargain with an Elder of the Universe, and see what has come of it; and yet you rush to make another? The *best* outcome is that he will refuse you outright.

The worst - I don't *know*, I probably do not have the imagination for it and therefore you certainly do not."

"I know better now," Thor protested. "I would be more careful."

Loki's lips twisted and he shook his head. "*No*. It's too risky."

"It would be my risk to take!" Thor said.

"Yes!" Loki cried. "Exactly!"

Thor fell quiet, and Loki turned away from him.

"Don't you understand?" He said. "I died trying to protect you, Thor. Trying to *save* you. I accepted that. I knew...I knew it was the likely outcome the moment I saw Thanos's ship rise into view." Loki's throat bobbed as he swallowed, and his voice trembled for a moment before steadying. "I know what I am, and what I am not. I knew that if...if one of us were to survive, it had to be you."

Thor's throat felt tight and he shook his head, couldn't stop shaking his head. "No," he said. "That isn't..." It sounded like Loki. Doing the swift calculation. Thor had been the one who never gave up on a fight, forcing his way through; Loki had always understood when it was necessary to give ground to strike from another angle.

The desperate bravery it must have taken, Thor thought, to walk forward as Loki had, into his death, and not balk. His nose burned.

Loki didn't look at him. "I do not belong here," he said.

"Of course not," Thor said, his voice raw. "Sakaar is no place for you."

"Not *here*," Loki said. "Here. With the living."

"Yes you do," Thor burst out. "Of course you do. I *need* you here."

"You don't-"

"Do you think you know my mind better than I do?" Thor interrupted. "Isn't that what you hate when I do it? That I came *here*, that I was desperate enough to come here and beg a favor from the man who enslaved me - does that mean nothing?"

Loki looked back at him, eyes aching. "Of course not," he said hoarsely. "It means everything. But Thor - this is not the life you deserve."

Thor gritted his teeth. "Let me decide what life I deserve. And do not tell me to - this is *killing* you, Loki. Do you think I cannot see it? He is breaking you down."

Loki flinched. "Give me more credit than that," he said, forcing a smile.

"It isn't about *credit*," Thor said. "This is what he *does*, isn't it? Everything has to be as he wishes. And if he needs to break people to make it so, then so be it. Right?"

Loki flinched again. "I can bear it," he said, but it was not a convincing lie. Thor just looked at him, and Loki closed his eyes. "What if you fail? What if you *die*, or he takes you prisoner? What then? Would you leave me alone?"

Thor shook his head, a lump in his throat. "I told you I would not abandon you."

"If you die, you cannot keep that promise."

"I won't die," Thor said boldly. Loki let out a broken laugh.

"What would you even bargain?" He asked. "What do you have to give him? Have you thought about *that*?"

"I have," Thor said. "And there is something that I possess of great worth."

Loki's eyes widened. "You *cannot* sell yourself for me," he said, voice suddenly sharp and a little wild. "I will not allow it, I will get Valkyrie - *Brunnhilde* - to drag you bodily back to Midgard and keep you there—"

"No," Thor said quickly, though with a little twist in his chest. "No, not - I meant Stormbreaker."

Loki turned his head and looked at the axe, momentarily silenced.

"Stormbreaker?"

"A weapon forged by the last living Dwarf by the power of a star," Thor said. "It has channeled both the storm and the dark energy of the Bifrost itself. Its handle is wrought from the limb of a Flora Colossus, freely given. And it is a weapon that made Thanos bleed."

Loki looked at Thor and then at the axe, and then back.

"There is only one in the universe," Thor said. "Would that, perhaps, be interesting to him?"

"That is the only form of transport that you have," Loki said. "Without use of a Bifrost you will be bound to Midgard—"

Thor shrugged. "Maybe someday Jane will build one. Or some other clever mortal. And if not...I would still consider it a very slight sacrifice." He half smiled. "And besides...I am not so bound as that. For you have always been able to move between worlds at will, have you not?"

Loki shook his head. "My magic barely works," he said, quiet and raw. "It's been stripped from me." Thor stared at Loki, who looked away again. "I did not want you to pity me more. It may be the Grandmaster's doing. Or it may never be coming back."

Thor stared at Loki, a stone settling in the pit of his stomach. Loki had always had his magic. As long as Thor could remember. It was his pride and joy, a part of him as Thor's lightning was a part of him. A link to their mother. The wellspring of Loki's strength.

"It will," Thor said, with confidence he didn't feel. "It must."

"Those are not the same thing." Loki's shoulders fell. "This idea of yours...it is reckless folly."

The words were harsh, but there was something in the tone in which they were said that made Thor's heart lift. "You've said that about many of my ideas."

Loki pressed the heels of his hands into his eyes. "And I was often right."

"But not always," Thor said. Loki was quiet.

"You are right," he said. "This is killing me. Perhaps I should be able to endure, but I cannot, and I

think I have hurt you enough.”

“And yourself?” Thor asked, because he needed to. “Have you been hurt enough?”

“I cannot answer that question.” Loki let his hands fall from his face. “Very well. If you are waiting for my permission to do this thing - to seek out the Collector - you have it.”

The air exploded out of Thor’s lungs, relief flooding through him. It was not, perhaps, the greatest obstacle, but it was an obstacle. And perhaps more than that, it was Loki agreeing to let Thor *help* him. “Thank you,” he said, and meant it. Loki twitched a shoulder.

“Don’t thank *me*,” he said. “You are doing this for my benefit, are you not?”

“I can...I will wait to leave,” Thor said. “For a few days. If you don’t mind Brunnhilde and Sif staying...and then I will go.” He met Loki’s eyes. “You will wait for me?”

Loki’s smile was faint and not really happy. “What else would I do?”

Give up. Surrender. Let go and fall into the abyss once again. Thor shook his head. Loki stared at him a moment longer, then sighed.

“I only ask...one thing, Thor. Please swear to me one thing. Do not make any bargain that requires you to sacrifice anything of yourself. If you do - I will refuse. I will do anything - *anything* I must to make it null. Anything at all.”

Thor met Loki’s eyes. “I swear,” he said. “I will not. When you are free, Loki...we will be free together.”

“If,” Loki said quietly, but Thor did not acknowledge it. *When*. It had to be *when*.

Thor offered to take both Brunnhilde and Sif back to Midgard early; to his surprise, both of them refused, Sif stubborn and almost indignant, Brunnhilde casually though Thor could detect the faint frown line between her eyebrows. This was all bothering her more than she wanted to show.

Sif, on the other hand, did not try to hide how much it was bothering her. Her eye twitched every time the Grandmaster spoke. She shadowed Loki in ways that made Thor distinctly nervous, and Loki distinctly irritated. He snapped at her and she glared back at him without giving ground.

“Can’t you make her *stop*?” Loki asked Thor.

“Even if I could I do not know that I would,” Thor said. “I can understand what she is trying to do.”

“She’s just lucky the Grandmaster finds her amusing,” Loki said, his voice taut. “If he didn’t, or if he stops - for her own *safety* at least you should tell her to back off.”

Thor pressed his lips together. “She just wants to protect you.”

Loki tensed. “She can’t,” he snapped. “And neither can you.” Thor flinched, eyes widening, and Loki looked away. “*Damn*. Thor, I didn’t mean...”

You’re not wrong, Thor thought, and said nothing. Loki sighed.

“I know you’re trying,” he said, quieter. “I know Sif is. But I can’t...she isn’t helping, and to be perfectly honest, I cannot afford to hope.”

Thor was becoming too familiar with this feeling: the gut-punched hurt of hearing Loki despair coupled with the knife-twist of fear.

“It is like the drug, Thor,” Loki said. “The brief high might be addictive, but I - cannot trust that a crash will not follow. And I do not know how many times I can claw my way back up.”

It was nothing Thor had not, on some level, known. It still hurt to hear. And it just increased the burden on Thor’s shoulders: Loki couldn’t afford to hope, and so when he went to the Collector, Thor couldn’t afford to fail.

He woke from an ugly dream of returning to Sakaar and finding Loki drugged into docility, his mind half gone, and trying to tell him that he hadn’t been able to convince the Collector to help. *It’s all right*, the dream-Loki said, smiling at him. *It’s all right, Thor. I’m finally happy.*

Thor sat up, shuddering, and got up. The door to Loki’s room was open, and it was empty. Thor stared at it for several moments, jaw working, and then left.

He went to go find Sif’s room and tapped lightly on the door to see if she was awake. It opened quickly and her eyes were clear, so it seemed he wasn’t the only one awake this night. Her wary expression melted into a small smile when she saw him, though it faded quickly.

“Thor,” she said. “You aren’t sleeping?”

“Not at the moment,” Thor said with a strained smile. “Neither are you.”

“I find it...difficult to relax, here.”

“Understandable.” Thor stepped in so she could close the door behind him. “And wise, to be truthful.” He exhaled slowly. “I am sorry I did not warn you. It was...cowardly.”

She shook her head. “I did not exactly give you much time to explain,” she said. “You do not need to apologize to me.”

“I appreciate that,” Thor said, though he wasn’t certain he believed it. “But I didn’t just come here to...I wanted to say that I intend to leave soon. Tomorrow, or the next day.”

Sif straightened. “To seek out the Collector,” she said. “Of course.”

Thor nodded. “I don’t think I should delay any longer.” It was hard to escape the feeling that he was running out of time. Which at once made him want to stay and was the reason he could not. “I will take you and Brunnhilde back to Midgard and then—”

“Wait,” Sif interrupted. “You don’t mean to take us with you?”

Thor blinked. “No,” he said. “I didn’t intend to.”

Sif pressed her lips together. “You are impossible,” she said. “So you just intend to go by yourself, is that it?”

“Yes?” Thor said.

Sif snorted. “Well, you aren’t,” she said. “Or at least - *I* will go with you. I won’t speak for Brunnhilde.”

Thor shook his head. “No, Sif,” he said. “You aren’t coming.”

The flash of hurt on Sif's face stung him. "Why not?" She demanded. "Do you still think that I bear Loki ill will? That I do not want to see him freed? Or do you think I could not help you, that I would be useless - that I cannot face what you can? How often have I proven myself--"

"Often," Thor said. "Countless times. But this...isn't your battlefield."

"Knowhere is dangerous," Sif said.

"I can protect myself from Ravagers and bandits," Thor said.

"You should still have eyes watching your back."

"Sif," Thor began, nearly in warning, but her hands balled into fists and she took a step toward him.

"You don't understand," she said. "I wasn't there! I wasn't there when Hela attacked and murdered my closest friends. I wasn't there when Asgard fell, to defend her people. I wasn't there when Thanos brought his slaughter to those who survived. Nigh everyone I loved is dead and *I wasn't there*. And now you would send me away, again! I swore oaths to protect and defend Asgard. To protect and defend her king, and her princes." Her eyes pleaded with him. "Will you make an oathbreaker of me?"

Thor looked away. "I am not asking you to break any oaths. I am sending you - I am sending you where you are most needed." He took a deep breath. "I am one man. Asgard is many. My life should not be worth more than theirs. And I can fight, while many of them cannot. I do not know how long I may be gone, or what I may find in the Collector's lair." He met Sif's eyes. "I need to know that I am leaving my people in safe hands. That even in my absence, they will be protected."

She stared at him, eyes wide and expression raw.

"It isn't that I do not want you with me," Thor said. "It is that I need the two of you - you and Brunnhilde - on Midgard."

Sif looked like she would argue, and Thor braced for it, prepared to fight her as hard as he needed. But then she simply slumped, her eyes casting down.

"I should have been there," she said softly.

"Then I might have lost you, too." Thor took a step toward her, laying his hands on her shoulders. "I know you want to help. And you are."

"I am not." Sif gave him a hard look. "I am not *blind*, Thor. I am not easing your burden, nor Loki's."

"You are easing mine," Thor said.

"But not his." Sif glanced away from him. "I try. I *try*. But he will scarcely speak with me beyond courtly small talk."

"I am sure he appreciates you trying, even if he doesn't show it," Thor said, but almost immediately he thought of Loki saying *I think I would almost rather forget entirely* and he wondered.

Sif looked dubious, but she sighed, apparently letting it go. "I could stay here," she said. "While you go. Remain with Loki."

For a moment Thor thought it was a good idea, but even before he could fully absorb that thought he could almost hear Loki saying *so you don't think I can be left alone? You'd treat me like a child who needs supervision?*

Thor could not help but feel that Loki *did*, or at least needed *guarding*, but he doubted that Loki would agree and he was afraid to make things worse. When Loki thought he had something to prove, he got reckless.

"No," he said. "I don't think...it would be too dangerous. I have some protection due to my - *agreement* with the Grandmaster; you do not. And...and it is good for you to be with our people. They may admire Brunnhilde, but she is a stranger still - you are known."

Sif didn't look happy. "You would have me offer leadership? I do not have a gift with..." she grimaced. "People."

Thor smiled at her, though it felt as crooked as it must look. "You are honest, and brave, and true. That is enough."

Her face didn't lift, but after a long moment she bowed her head. "If you think it's best," she said, still reluctantly, and then fell quiet. Thor could see in the tilt of her eyebrows that there was still something she wanted to say.

"What is it?"

She looked down, lips pressing together. "He acts - Loki acts - as though it does not matter," she said. "As though it is not a hideous wrong for him to be in this position." She seemed to hear the possible double entendre at the same time Thor did, by the thinning of her lips.

"I know," Thor said.

"Why?" Sif burst out, as though she'd only just been holding it in. "I can understand the necessity of - *pretending* around that *monster*, but why with me?"

Thor wanted to say *I don't understand it either*, but he did, didn't he? Loki had told him. *You keep me from being able to pretend that this is fine.*

He glanced away. "I think he feels as though it is the only way he can survive."

"That's absurd," Sif said at once, and Thor winced.

"I will not judge him for it," Thor said, trying to keep it from sounding too much like reproach, even if it was. "So long as Loki finds a way to continue on while I try to free him...as far as I am concerned, let him do what he must."

Sif's eyes widened. "I don't mean to say—"

"I think," Thor said carefully, still eyeing a corner of the room, "that Loki feels shame enough without being told there should be more."

"That isn't what I *am* saying," Sif said, indignant, and Thor made himself look back at her.

"I know it isn't," he said. "But it is probably what he hears."

"Norns," Sif said unhappily after a few moments of quiet. "I have *always* struggled with speaking to Loki. It seems I have only gotten worse." She shook her head. "Well...we will go back, and you

will go to Knowhere, and all of this will be over soon.”

“Yes,” Thor said, wondering if Sif truly felt such confidence. Wishing that he could feel it. “Soon.”

Thor bade Loki farewell.

“I will return soon,” he said. Loki nodded, his eyes dull and listless, and Thor reached out to him, clasping his shoulders. “Keep the faith,” he said, fighting to infuse his voice with optimism he did not truly feel. “Do you not know that I can do anything I set my mind to?”

Loki’s smile was crooked and didn’t quite reach his eyes. “Norns know you will always try.”

That was not, Thor thought, a reassuring answer. He squeezed Loki’s shoulders instead of saying anything more, though; he didn’t want to argue. *You will be here when I get back, won’t you?* He wanted to say. *You won’t leave me again?*

He didn’t say it. And he did not bid the Grandmaster farewell. He didn’t think he could face him without either trying to hit him or vomiting on his feet. Not when he looked at Loki and saw his pallor and the hollow look in his eyes that reminded Thor all too much of the blankness of death.

“I’ll be back soon,” he said again, and Loki’s attempt at a smile slid off his face.

“Be careful,” he said quietly, and then pulled gently away. Thor’s heart squeezed and he took a deep breath in, then lunged to hug Loki as tightly as he dared. Loki made a small, startled, noise, and then leaned into Thor; he could feel him shudder before he fell still, breathing shallowly.

There were so many things Thor found he wanted to say. In the end, all he said was, “I am sorry that I did this to you.”

“You didn’t,” Loki said, his voice muffled. “You were...I probably would have done worse, if it had been you.”

Don’t absolve me, Thor wanted to cry, because just this once he wanted Loki to be angry again. But he just sighed and said, “nonetheless.”

“Thor...” Loki shook his head but didn’t pull away. “Just...be careful.”

“I will,” Thor said, his throat closing. He made himself step away with difficulty. It was even harder to turn his back and walk away.

“You okay?” Brunnhilde asked, when they stood on Midgard once again.

“Yes,” Thor said, his voice hoarse. “But I’ll be better once this is done.”

“Spend the night,” Brunnhilde said. “Try to get some sleep before you go. You’ll need your rest if you don’t want to make any stupid mistakes.” Thor hesitated, thinking of Loki, waiting, of time passing by on Sakaar, of how much the Grandmaster might carve away from his brother while he was gone, idling.

“She is right,” Sif said, coming up next to him and putting a hand on his shoulder. “You need rest. One night—”

“It won’t be one night on Sakaar,” Thor interrupted. “And how long do you think Loki’s nights feel?”

The moment he said it Thor felt ill. Sif flinched, going pale, and Thor sighed, dragging a hand down his face. He wanted to tell her *you didn't see him when his fingers uncurled from the end of Gungnir. You don't see how he looks almost the same now, only that it is happening more slowly.*

But he knew she was right. That they were right. He was exhausted, and heartsore, and in no shape for a difficult, and probably dangerous, conversation. And if he wasn't careful - wasn't as clear-headed as he could be - he might just make everything worse.

He bowed his head and thought an apology that Loki couldn't hear. "Very well," he said. "I'll take the night here, and leave in the morning."

"Good call," Brunnhilde said, eyes sharp for all her voice was dry. "You might think about calling your Midgardian friends and giving them an update, besides."

"I'll think about it," Thor said, though he didn't think he'd actually do it. They couldn't help. At best they might get in the way. "I should go speak with the people."

Brunnhilde exchanged a glance he couldn't read with Sif. "Good plan," she said.

"I'll go with you," Sif said. Thor frowned.

"Do you think I'm going to sneak off in the middle of the night?"

"Didn't seem out of the question," Brunnhilde said with a shrug. Flushing, Thor looked at Sif, who just looked back at him. Thor glared at them both.

"I won't," he said. "And I don't need to be *watched*."

"I am just accompanying you," Sif said blandly. Thor pressed his lips together and took a slow breath in, then let it out. It was a losing battle, and probably a pointless one.

"Fine," he said. "As it pleases you." She looked visibly relieved, and Thor reminded himself with a pang that Sif had lost a great deal very quickly, and that she had never been any better at dealing with helplessness than he was. If it reassured her...it couldn't hurt.

He turned to head back toward their still-pitiful village, squaring his shoulders and donning what he hoped was a convincing milieu of confidence. Loki's need pulled at him, a drumbeat in his chest, but his people needed him too. He owed them, too.

Tomorrow...tomorrow he would go to Knowhere and ask the Collector for help. And he wouldn't take no for an answer.

When Thor finally managed to sleep - and it took him a long time - he dreamed about Loki.

That in itself was not unusual. Loki had occupied many of his dreams since his death. But this was not a dream of watching Thanos murder his brother in front of him, or of Loki slipping through his fingers as he turned to ash, or Loki reaching for him only to be yanked back, his eyes widening as bruises bloomed around his neck and color bled from his skin. This time—

At first he could only see Loki's face, his eyes wide open and gasping, his head twisting away from Thor with a thin whine. Thor's eyes widened and he reached out, or tried, but his hand wouldn't move.

"That's it, sweetheart," he heard, a too familiar purr. "*Good* boy. Just - mm, just gorgeous."

Thor's stomach lurched and he recoiled, but that only meant he could see more: Loki's legs hitched up over the Grandmaster's hips, his hands bound over his head, the Grandmaster moving over him. Thor tried to lunge for him with a snarl, but again he couldn't move.

"See?" The Grandmaster was saying. "I can be - *nice*. When you're, hm, when you're good. And you're going to be good for me, aren't you?"

Thor closed his eyes and looked away. Or tried, but he couldn't do that either, only watch as the Grandmaster shifted Loki's body and Loki arched with a cry. "Yes," he said, breathless and fragmented. "I - I will, I'll, please—"

A noise burst out of Thor's chest, somewhere between a groan and a snarl, fighting to wake up. The Grandmaster stopped moving, stroking a hand down one of Loki's quivering thighs.

"Shh," he said. "Shh, honey. You're upsetting your brother."

"What-?" Loki said, voice shaking, but his eyes moved over Thor unseeing even as the Grandmaster turned his head and smiled at him, eyes glinting.

"Hey, Sparkles," he said.

Thor felt dizzy, not sure if it was rage or horror.

"You didn't say bye," he said conversationally, and pumped his hips once, fingers flexing into Loki's flesh. "*Very* rude. Loki was, um - quite apologetic on your behalf. Weren't you, honeybunch?"

Loki's eyes were squeezed closed, his teeth in his lower lip, trembling. The Grandmaster clicked his tongue and looked back at Thor. "You'll just have to take my word for it."

This is a dream, Thor wanted to deny, or *how are you doing this, get out of my head*, but his tongue clove to the roof of his mouth. The Grandmaster's smile widened.

"Stop this," he managed, finally.

"No, thanks," the Grandmaster said. "I'm good." He looked back down at Loki, chest heaving, panting. Thor tried again to pull his eyes away, and couldn't.

"What do you *want*," he said, half snarl and half plea. The Grandmaster hummed.

"I've *got* what I want," he said. "I mean, honestly. Look at him. And you handed him to me on a platter, that was...very nice of you, really." Loki let out a quiet sort of whimper and the Grandmaster stroked a thumb across his cheek. "There, there. You're doing *great*, kitten."

"Why are you *doing* this," Thor said, and hated the crack in his voice.

"Why, Sparkles," the Grandmaster said. "Do I need a *reason* for *everything*? Sheesh. No wonder you're no *fun*." He punctuated each emphasized word with a thrust and Thor closed his eyes, gut churning; that didn't shut out the sounds Loki made, though. "You're - *ah*, that's good - sort of right, though. I did want to...make sure...mm, that you knew, you were *clear* on...things."

I'm going to kill you, Thor thought. *I'm going to rip your throat out and watch you bleed to death—*

"Careful, now," the Grandmaster said. "Let's not...lose our temper, hm? It's not...really not that complicated."

Thor took shallow breaths. "You're disgusting," he said.

"Let's not call names," the Grandmaster said. "Let me just make this nice and simple. All right? Loki's mine. He's always going to be mine. And you can't - do - anything - about that. Oh, *there* we go," he groaned, and Thor swayed, his eyes still squeezed closed.

"Get out of my head," he said. "Get out. And never - *never* -"

"Do this again? Or what?" The Grandmaster said. "What are you going to do, babe? Because from where I'm standing - or, uh, where I'm lying down fucking your brother - you can't do a single thing."

Thor's head spun. "I hate you," he said.

"That's too bad," the Grandmaster said. "Cause you're stuck with me. Unless you want to walk away, of course. You know you're just making things *harder* for sweet, dear, Lo-lo."

"I won't," Thor croaked. "I'm not going to leave him."

"Your call," the Grandmaster said. "Maybe we'll, uh...revisit this conversation in a week or so? Cause I gotta say that this is - this has been *tame*. But if you're up for it, I'm up for it. And Loki's...well, he just has to be up for it, doesn't he?"

Thor swayed. His mouth opened, then closed, wordless.

"Buh-bye now," the Grandmaster said. "I've got a second round planned that's going to need all my focus."

Thor snapped awake. He barely realized where he was before he was stumbling to his feet, out into the night air, and vomiting the hearty dinner he'd eaten onto the grass so violently that it burned his nose. Bent over and shaking, he stayed there, his chest too tight to breathe properly.

You can't do a single thing.

A sound like a sob tore out of Thor's throat before he could swallow it.

"Thor?"

Sif's voice. His first instinct was to straighten up and play at strength, but he didn't think he could do it just now. His stomach was still churning. He tried to imagine *that*, every night, every time he closed his eyes. *It wasn't real*, he wanted to tell himself, *it's not really happening*, but he was not that much a coward. Not quite.

"Thor?" Sif said again.

"He's a monster," Thor croaked. "The worst sort of - the lowest creature that has ever - he taunts me, he wants to drive me away - he was in my *mind*."

Sif hissed in a breath. "Your dreams?" She said. Thor made himself nod, hoping she would not ask more. To his relief, she did not. "Are you certain he cannot simply be slain?"

"Even if he could be," Thor said heavily, "I fear what the consequences would be to Loki, if he were not freed first." He closed his eyes. "I am a coward."

"What? No!" Sif cried, indignant. "Thor - you are the *furthest* thing from a coward."

Thor shook his head. "You are wrong."

"Look at what you are about to do!" She took a step toward him, grasping his forearms. "What you are willing to face, to save your brother—"

"What does that mean, when I condemned him in the first place?" Thor brushed Sif's hands away and turned his back. "I am a coward. I was afraid to live without him, and so I had him dragged out of Valhalla and gave him into that creature's hands. Had I not..." His voice choked off in his throat. He did not turn to look at Sif.

"You could not have known," she said, but sounded hesitant.

"Brunnhilde warned me," Thor interrupted. "She *said* it was a bad idea. Warned me not to do it. But I did it anyway, because I was selfish and cowardly and now Loki pays the price for both." Thor clenched his fists, fingers digging into his own palms, and closed his eyes. "I should have just left him in peace."

He heard Sif move closer and this time did not shake her off when she put a hand on his arm. "I'm sorry," she said. Thor laughed humorlessly.

"It isn't me that you should apologize to."

"Why not? Are you not hurting? Are you not wounded?" Sif sounded more certain now, her grip on Thor's arm tightening. "So - so perhaps you should have been more careful. But would it have been better for you to spend the rest of your life grieving? I cannot think that *Loki* would say so."

"I can't exactly ask him," Thor said bitterly. Sif's fingers squeezed hard enough that he twisted toward her and saw her glaring at him..

"I feel I can guess. And now - furthermore, now you are trying to make it right. To *help*. That is not the action of a cowardly or selfish man."

"I do it not in small part for myself," Thor countered. Sif growled.

"Don't be stupid, Thor," she said. "And stop wallowing, you ass. It doesn't suit you."

Thor blinked at her, taken aback. Sif's eyes widened a hair and then she dropped her gaze to his feet and let go. "My apologies. You are my king, I should not—"

"We are long past that, Sif," Thor said, but he reached out to put his hands on her shoulders. "Thank you."

"For calling you an ass?" Sif said, glancing up with a flicker of a smile. Thor just shook his head.

"I need to leave," he said. "I know it isn't morning, but...I won't be able to sleep more."

"Let me come with you—"

"No, Sif."

Sif's jaw shifted, and for a moment Thor thought she would argue - thought he would have to fight her for it, no matter how little he wanted to. "I can't stop you," she said finally, the words dragged out of her. "Go well, Thor. And safely."

"I will." Thor called Stormbreaker to his hand and took a deep breath, focusing his thoughts on Knowhere and summoning the power.

He didn't want Sif to realize that he was leaving her alone to inform Brunnhilde of his departure. With any luck, Thor told himself, he wouldn't have to be away too long.

Knowhere was a disaster zone.

More than usual, even. Large swaths had still not been repaired at all, and even those that had been seemed to have been slapped together with little care for how they might stay standing. A few traders had begun to slink back in, but for the most part the sole inhabitants remained the unfortunates who could not go elsewhere and the predators eager to take advantage of the chaos. Thor saw one of them eyeing him and stared back at her until she turned away.

He rolled out his shoulders and went looking for someone who might point him to the Collector without trying to cut his throat.

It took him three attempted burglaries and a Skrull trying to stab him in the back before Thor managed to corner a scrawny Malkorian and ask where he could find the Collector. It took a fair amount of pressing to get a straight answer, but he managed it eventually. The directions he received took him to one of the few fully rebuilt structures Thor had seen since his arrival. Compared to the Grandmaster's tower, it was relatively restrained, but that was a low bar.

There was a front door. Thor knocked on it, stepped back, and waited, but no one came. He tried again, contemplating the danger of breaking his way in, and decided that would be a poor first impression. He couldn't afford to alienate the Collector. Couldn't afford to even *irritate* him.

Still no answer. Thor chewed on the inside of his cheek and knocked again.

This time, finally, the door opened. "The collection is closed to visitors," said the man standing in front of him. Thor took him in quickly. He could see the family resemblance, though the Collector - and it had to be him - did not have a trace of the Grandmaster's smile.

That was actually a relief.

"I am not here as a visitor," Thor said. "I am here to speak to you."

His eyes narrowed. "You are, are you?"

"Yes," Thor said. "I have something that might be of interest to you."

Thor saw some interest spark. "Oh?"

"May I come in?" He asked. *Polite*, he thought. *Deferential, even. Don't show you're desperate.*

Even though you are.

The Collector regarded him in silence for several more moments, then inclined his head. "Very well," he said. "Given the current state of my collection, I suppose I should not turn away possible acquisitions out of hand. But I will not...appreciate your wasting my time."

"I don't intend to."

"They never do." The Collector turned and swept back inside, and Thor followed him, skin prickling uneasily. He wanted to ask *how did you survive* but he suspected that would be unwise.

Thor peered around the interior, not sure what to expect, but the place was almost entirely empty. There were niches clearly constructed to hold artifacts, and a few tanks that Thor eyed uneasily,

wondering what was meant to go in them - but for the moment, they were unoccupied. He cleared his throat.

“You seem to have rebuilt nicely,” he offered.

“My entire collection was either destroyed or looted by thieves,” the Collector said coldly. “Many items were the sole remaining artifacts from planets that have been gone for one hundred generations. Truly, literally, irreplaceable.”

Thor winced. “I am...sorry,” he said carefully. Some part of him wondered *and how many of the living beings you were keeping here died because they couldn’t get away?*

Loki would be proud, Thor thought. He’d gotten better at keeping his mouth shut.

The Collector gave him a sour look. “My archive was the work of a span of time longer than your species has existed,” he said. “You cannot possibly comprehend the loss.”

Almost my entire people were slaughtered in front of me, along with my brother. My mother was murdered, and my sister tried to kill me. I think I know something of loss. Thor forced himself to bow his head. “I only meant to offer sympathy.”

“Your *sympathy* is meaningless to me,” the Collector said. Then sighed. “What is it you have to sell?”

Thor removed Stormbreaker from its place across his back and held it out in two hands. “This.”

The Collector looked at it, and then at him. “A weapon,” he said, unimpressed.

“Not just any weapon,” Thor said. “It was forged in Nidavellir by Asgard’s King and the last living Dwarf. It can be used to manipulate dark energy to create portals through space. The handle is made from the limb of a Flora Colossus—”

“Stories,” the Collector said. “I do not purchase items based on elaborate fictions.”

“Not fictions,” Thor insisted, his heart starting to race. “I speak the truth. This axe - Stormbreaker - made Thanos bleed.”

That, at least, seemed to get the Collector’s attention. “Hm,” he said, scanning the axe again. He reached out, fingers trailing lightly over the shaft, and then looked up at Thor. “You are Asgardian, correct?”

“Yes,” Thor said carefully. “Correct.”

“Interesting.” The Collector’s eyes bored into him. “I understand that your people are now relatively few.”

“We suffered greatly from Thanos’s attacks,” Thor said. The Collector blinked slowly.

“If you gave me two of them,” he said, “I could ensure that your species was...preserved.”

Thor stiffened. For a wild moment he thought *if it convinces him to help* but a moment after he hated himself for even considering it. “No,” he said too quickly, and then added, “thank you. I will not bargain my people.”

“Hmm,” the Collector said. He looked down at the axe again, and held out his hands. “May I?”

Thor hesitated, but he had to step carefully. He relinquished Stormbreaker and stepped back. For all its weight, the Collector held it with ease, raising it almost to his face and examining the blade, the haft. He ran a finger along the edge, then raised his head to look at Thor.

“What sort of currency will you accept?” He asked, and relief made Thor slump. But of course that was only the first step.

“Actually,” Thor said, “I would rather be paid in a favor.”

Another one of those slow, lazy, blinks. “A favor,” the Collector said. “Do you mean...from me?”

“Yes,” Thor said. “In lieu of other payment, I would make a - *small* request.”

“I am not in the habit of granting requests.”

Thor glanced at the Collector’s hands still running idly over Stormbreaker and took a risk. “That is the only payment I will take,” he said. “I will...I suppose I will have to find some other buyer.” He held out a hand to take the axe back.

Don’t call my bluff. Please don’t call my bluff.

The Collector’s eyes narrowed. “Let’s not get ahead of ourselves,” he said. “If you had something...*specific*...in mind, perhaps an arrangement could be made.”

“I do,” Thor said, and swallowed hard. “My brother has been trapped. I would ask that you help me free him.”

The Collector’s bushy eyebrows rose. “I am an archivist, not a hero. I do not perform rescues, Asgardian.”

Thor shook his head. “It isn’t a rescue. It would be more of an...intervention.” He took a deep breath. “He is...my brother is on Sakaar.”

Silence. “Hm,” the Collector said. Thor waited, holding his breath. “So you are asking *me*...to intervene in the...affairs of my...sibling.”

“Yes,” Thor said, because he didn’t think there was any point in hedging around it.

“In exchange for this...curious weapon of yours.”

“Yes,” Thor said. The Collector was quiet. He seemed to be considering.

“That is a very bold request,” he said.

“You are the only person I know of who might be capable of convincing him to let my brother go,” Thor said, hoping flattery might have some effect. The Collector did not seem impressed. He scrutinized Thor, and Thor looked back at him, trying to keep his face open but not show his fear, his hope, his heartache.

Please, he wanted to say, to *beg*.

“Very well,” the Collector said, and Thor’s heart lurched in his chest.

“You’ll do it?”

“I will,” the Collector said. “Though only partially for this axe of yours. Unique as it is, I would not

normally...but it is only fair given the amount that En Dwi has - *removed* from *my* collection over the millennia.” Some annoyance bled into the Collector’s voice. Thor’s legs almost gave out and he locked his knees.

“Thank you,” he said, and it came out hoarse. The Collector examined him.

“Asgard’s Vault housed a great many remarkable pieces,” he said.

“Destroyed when Asgard was,” Thor said. “So far as I know.”

“Pity.” He lifted the axe again, then held it toward Thor. “Now. I’d prefer not to waste time on this little...errand. You said it could make portals? Let us have a demonstration.”

Close, Thor’s heart whispered. *So close*. He took Stormbreaker back. “Gladly.”

It was the middle of the night when they landed on Sakaar at the foot of the Grandmaster’s tower. The Collector’s face, illuminated by the neon lights, scrunched up in mild disgust. “I see he hasn’t changed,” he said, but Thor didn’t think it was meant for him.

He cleared his throat. “I think it might be better if...”

The Collector looked at Thor as though he’d almost forgotten he was there, and wasn’t terribly pleased to be reminded. “Are you telling me how to conduct my business?”

“No,” Thor said quickly. “I was only thinking that...I’d like to update my brother.”

The Collector waved a hand. “Do what you want. I hardly need your assistance with En Dwi.”

Thor kept himself from exhaling with relief. In truth, as much as he did want to tell Loki the good news, he also did not want to be present when the Grandmaster learned that he was going to be losing his *favorite pet*. And he *was* going to lose him.

“Be ready to leave,” the Collector said. “As I said, I want to keep this...brief.”

“Me, too,” Thor said, heartfelt. “I have no wish to stay here a moment longer than necessary.” He turned to enter the tower, and thought he heard the Collector murmur ‘*tacky*’ before Thor left him behind.

His breathing quickened as the elevator climbed, joy bubbling up in him. It was over, or it was *almost* over, it was going to be over and Loki would be *free*. They would go back to Midgard, Thor would hand over Stormbreaker, and then...

And then *anything*. They could forge a life there, side by side, *together*, as it always should have been.

Thor could barely keep the smile off his face as he walked to their rooms.. He realized belatedly that Loki might not be there at all - that he might, in fact, be with the Grandmaster - and exhaled when he saw the light on. He tapped lightly on the door and then let himself in.

Thor’s eyes fell on Loki. He looked diminished, exhausted, his eyes dull. He was sitting on the couch next to the window, loose-limbed with a glass dangling limply from his fingers.

“Loki,” Thor said, and he jerked, rousing. His head turned, eyes focusing on Thor, and tried to smile, but it was a truly pitiful attempt.

“Hello, Thor,” he said. “Back again?”

Thor walked over and crouched down, taking Loki’s hands in his. “One last time,” he said. Loki’s breathing caught, his eyes widening before he relaxed, almost collapsing.

“Oh,” he said, voice quiet. “That’s...good.” He started to draw his hands back and Thor tightened his grip, realizing belatedly—

“No,” he said quickly. “No, I don’t mean that *I* am—”

The door banged open. “What,” the Grandmaster said, “is the meaning of this?” There was a low vibration in his voice that Thor had never heard before. He stood, and turned, even as Loki scrambled to his feet.

“Grandmaster,” he said breathlessly.

“Oh no, Lo-lo, no sweet-talking me now. I don’t want to hear a *word* from you. Except - did you *know* about this little, little *plot* your sneaky, sneaky brother was hatching? Did you know he was going to try to steal you away—”

Thor’s stomach plunged. The Collector had lied. Or failed. Or - it didn’t matter. He looked at Loki sidelong and opened his mouth, prepared to lie: *I didn’t tell him, Loki didn’t know anything.*

“I knew,” Loki said, before Thor got the words out. His voice shook very slightly, and then steadied. “Of *course* I knew. Actually, it was my idea.”

Thor twisted to stare at him, but Loki wasn’t looking at him. He was standing, back straight, lips twisted toward a faint and unpleasant smile. The Grandmaster’s eyes narrowed. “*Your* idea. Honey - sweetpea. I thought we’d been *over* this.”

“Yes,” Loki said. “You thought you had me completely under your thumb. You thought you owned me.” That little tremor again, and Thor could see Loki’s hands shaking, too.

“That’d be because I - *well*, not to be indelicate, but I sort of *do*.”

“Bought and paid for,” Loki said, his voice thick and bitter. “And yet. You might hold my life in your filthy hands. You might have my body to use as you will. But I have enough freedom still to hate you. And maybe I couldn’t leave, but Thor - *he* could. And you were too besotted with your own game to notice—”

The Grandmaster’s expression flared with rage, twisting. “You *ungrateful* - after everything I’ve *done* for you! That’s - you know what, that’s enough. Deal’s off.” He waved a hand sharply.

Loki gagged. Choked. One of his hands rose toward his neck and Thor twisted toward him, eyes widening.

“No,” he said. “No, *no*, *stop it*, it wasn’t true, it was me!”

“You two are just - more trouble than you’re worth, aren’t you?” The Grandmaster said coldly. “Just a regular pair of troublemakers. What a *miserable* waste of time. I can’t *believe* - and now look what you made me do!” He gestured at Loki, who was clutching at his throat. Thor pulled Loki’s hands away but that just exposed the bruises blooming on his skin, livid and ugly, and the rasp of Loki fighting for air roared in Thor’s ears.

“Please,” he begged. “Please, *please* don’t do this, let him go, I swear to you - I’ll swear anything

you like—”

“Enough is enough,” the Grandmaster said. Thor sought Loki’s gaze, frantic, and met his eyes.

Go, Loki mouthed, his fingers spasming as his body jerked.

“No,” Thor said. “No, no, *no*—”

“Why do you always have to be so *dramatic*, En Dwi?” He heard, but couldn’t turn, holding his own breath like it would somehow *help*.

“Why do *you* always have to *ruin* everything?”

“Stop killing your new toy. You’ll only be upset about it later.”

The heaving gasp of air filling lungs was, for a moment, all Thor could hear. Loki collapsed forward, gasping, and Thor caught him, almost sobbing. He made his head turn so he could look at the Collector - standing in the doorway and looking bored. The Grandmaster just looked...petulant.

“*Taneleer*. I thought we agreed *ages* ago not to interfere with each others’ business,” he said.

“Four centuries ago you visited and stole the last crate of Coatati liquor in the universe,” the Collector said. “And *two* centuries ago you walked off with my D’Bari. I don’t suppose they’re still here, are they?”

“Mm,” the Grandmaster said. He did not look particularly contrite. “That’s *hardly* the same as - as demanding that I let one of my *favorite* guests wander off just because you *said* so. Why do *you* care, anyway?”

“Loki,” Thor said lowly. “Are you...”

“Fine,” Loki rasped. “I’m fine.”

“I was made an offer,” the Collector was saying.

“But I’m your *brother*.”

“I didn’t notice you helping when Thanos came after me and destroyed my *entire* collection. What were you doing, by the way?”

The Grandmaster shrugged. “I was busy.”

The Collector sighed. “Come, En Dwi. You’ll find another one. He can’t be *that* special.”

“You wouldn’t say that if you knew Lo-lo,” the Grandmaster said. He glanced toward Loki and Thor and suddenly looked thoughtful. “Maybe if you did - I mean, I’d be willing to share if—”

Thor heard himself growl. “Don’t,” he said.

“Hush, Sparkles, grownups are talking,” the Grandmaster said. Thor’s teeth clicked together and though he tried he could not pry them apart.

“I’m not interested,” the Collector said.

“You couldn’t *make* me,” the Grandmaster said. “This is my planet. If I decided to keep him - or just kill him, I could do that, too - there’s nothing *you* could do about it.”

Thor held onto Loki tighter. Loki was breathing shallowly and quickly, like he was afraid of drawing attention to himself by making too much noise.

“Technically, yes,” the Collector said. “But do you want to start that kind of fight? We *also* agreed that sort of thing was...better avoided, especially after what happened to Ord.”

The Grandmaster pressed his lips together, looking even less pleased. “Why, *Tan*. There’s no call to be like *that*.” The Collector said nothing, and he sighed. “Of all the...you have no sense of *fun*, do you know that? Just - barging into a guy’s place and - no *wonder* Knowhere’s such a bleak place. You had *better* make this up to me.”

“This is you making up for all the times you’ve stolen things from *me*,” the Collector said. He cleared his throat. “Now, if you would...?”

Thor held his breath as the Grandmaster turned back toward them. His eyes narrowed at Thor, who glared back at him, and then he sighed and walked over. He brushed Thor aside like he was nothing and pulled Loki to his feet, smoothing his clothes.

“Hey, sweetheart,” he said. “We had fun, didn’t we?”

“Let go of me,” Loki said, his voice shaking. Thor lurched back toward them and met an invisible barrier.

The Grandmaster clicked his tongue. “So *coy*,” he said, and tipped Loki’s chin up with two fingers to kiss him, then bit Loki’s lower lip hard enough that he hissed before withdrawing. He raised a hand and clicked his fingers.

Loki gasped like he’d been holding his breath and finally been allowed to inhale. He blinked twice as the Grandmaster stepped away.

“Don’t be a stranger, honeybunch,” he said. “If you change your mind...well, you could probably convince me to take you back.” He winked, and then looked toward Thor. “You, though... I wouldn’t pop your head up where I could see it if I were you. I’m really *very* upset with you right now.”

Thor’s jaw finally unlocked, and he opened his mouth, but Loki’s hand clamped abruptly on his arm with enough force to bruise. The Grandmaster seemed disappointed.

“Don’t leave without saying goodbye, Taneleer,” he said. “Or - well, or *do*, that’d be fine. I’m not very happy with you, either.”

“I will somehow forbear,” the Collector said as the Grandmaster swept out, and then turned a cool gaze on Thor and held out a hand. “Now. Your end of the bargain?”

“We need Stormbreaker to get to Midgard,” Thor said. The Collector did not move, though his white eyebrows rose. But he couldn’t... “That was part of the deal,” he insisted. “That we would get to go back to Earth.”

“I remember the bargain.”

“Thor,” Loki said, his voice a little hoarse. “Just do it.”

He took a deep breath, worked his hand open and closed, and walked over to pick Stormbreaker up from where he’d let it fall. He held it out, unable to think *I am giving away our only leverage, if he walks away and we are left trapped here—*

The Collector took the axe in both hands, looked it up and down, and smiled. “Well,” he said. “It is a beginning.”

“Now,” Thor started to say, before Sakaar was swept away in a blur of rainbow light.

Chapter 5

Chapter Notes

And here we are at the end.

I'd just like to reiterate my huge thanks to three people: [led-lite](#) for extensive cheerleading and enabling and brainstorming, [loxxxlay](#) for enthusiastic encouragement, and most of all [ameliarating](#) for not only betaing this nearly-novel-length monster on a deadline, but also helping work me out of at least one major plot difficulty.

You're all delightful people, and me and this fic both owe you.

If you enjoyed this wild ride - may I point you in the direction of [my Tumblr](#), where you can get more like this (and also a bunch of other things), including early excerpts of future fic? It's fun. I swear.

Without further ado.

Thor didn't see Loki in the stream of light that took him back to Earth, and for a panicked moment upon landing he thought *he's not here, something went wrong, he's still on Sakaar and I can't get back there—*

"Thor?" He heard, hoarse and a little unsteady, and Thor whirled around to see Loki, looking dazed and unsteady, the fresh bruises still livid on his skin, but - here, alive, *free*.

"It worked," Thor said, and then repeated as a question, hesitating: "it worked?"

"I...it seems so," Loki said. "This does...seem to be Midgard. And I haven't - dropped dead." His hand rose up toward his neck and fell away.

"Norns," Thor said. "It really..." A wave of sheer relief crashed down on his head and he couldn't hold it back - and didn't try very hard. "Loki - you're *free*!"

"I am," Loki said, hushed, though it sounded half a question - *I am?* Thor reached out for him, half expecting his hands to pass through, some trick, something, but he was there, solid, away from Sakaar.

"Yes," he said firmly. "Yes, you *are*."

Loki swayed. Took a deep, unsteady breath, and let it out in something like a sob. Thor's heart lurched.

"Loki?" He said, fear shooting through him like lightning. Loki's hands came up to cover his face.

"Is this real?" He said. "Tell me - tell me this is real. Prove it to me. Prove that this is not - a trick, or another game—"

Thor sucked in a breath, then controlled himself and gripped Loki's shoulders. "No," he said. "*No*,

this is no trick, no illusion. This is real. You are free of that place. You are free of *him*.”

Loki took a couple more ragged breaths, and then something in him seemed to crumple. He sat down hard on the grass, slipping out of Thor’s grasp, and bent forward with his face in his hands. His shoulders shook and he was gasping for air and for a panicked moment Thor thought something had gone wrong.

Then Loki raised his head and Thor realized that he was laughing - laughing, wildly, almost hysterically, his face cracked into an almost painfully relieved smile.

“It’s over,” he said. “It’s *over*. He’s gone. I can feel it. He’s *gone*, and my magic is - *there* again, I thought I was going to die but I am - I’m *free*. I never have to let him touch me again.”

Thor’s spirits lifted, soared. “No,” he said fiercely. “You don’t. Never again.”

Loki’s fingers dug into the ground. “Sometimes,” he almost whispered, “just sometimes, I believe that the Norns can be kind.”

Thor extended a hand. “Come,” he said. “People will come. You should meet them on your feet. The prince - Asgard’s savior - returned.”

Loki’s smile ebbed. He looked up at Thor. “I am not,” he said.

“To them, you are,” Thor said gently. “And they will be glad to see you.”

After a moment, Loki took Thor’s hand and stood, though his relief and happiness was gone. He looked - rather, he looked nervous, almost skittish, half ready to bolt. Thor moved to stand beside him, a hand on his shoulder.

To his relief, it was Brunnhilde who reached them first. Her eyes flicked from Thor to Loki, and a smile bloomed. “Nine fucking Hels,” she said. “It actually worked?”

“Yes,” Thor said. “It actually worked.”

“Barely,” Loki said, with a sidelong glance, but Thor refused to let his spirits be dampened. Brunnhilde turned toward him.

“You look better already,” she said, smile turning a little crooked. “You’ve got that ‘no one’s going to be molesting me today’ glow.”

Loki twitched slightly and Thor frowned at Brunnhilde, but he said, dry as bone, “thank you,” sounding so much like himself. Like *himself*. Thor almost wanted to laugh with joy just for that small thing.

“You’re welcome,” Brunnhilde said, and then, a little more seriously, “glad you made it back, Lackey.”

“Are you?” Loki said, sounding faintly wary.

“That’s what I said, isn’t it?” Brunnhilde said. “And I don’t lie to be nice.”

The corner of Loki’s mouth tipped upwards, barely. “Thank you,” he said.

Brunnhilde twitched a shoulder awkwardly. “Don’t mention it.”

Thor couldn’t stop smiling. He didn’t feel like he was going to for a long time.

He did, though.

Loki lasted for a while. He accepted Sif's embrace and even smiled at her, and at first with Asgard's people he did well - accepting their astonishment and confusion and then delight (to Thor's relief - he realized only belatedly that they might not feel so positively as he did about this development).

But he wore thin quickly, still. Thor could see it in the slight glaze in his eyes, the increasingly stilted way he spoke, that slight shake in his hands that was a new and concerning development. (It would pass, Thor told himself. It must.)

Thor fought not to let his heart sink, simply to excuse them both and take Loki back to his cabin. "We will have to build you a place of your own," he said. "Until then, if you wouldn't mind staying with me - of course, if you'd rather make other arrangements--"

"No," Loki interrupted. "That isn't necessary. I would like to stay with you."

Thor felt another wave of relief, and smiled at Loki. "It'll be just like when we were children," he said. "I'll find another bed for you, but I'm afraid for tonight...I'll do my best not to steal all the blankets."

"I would appreciate that," Loki said, though he sounded oddly distracted. Thor eyed him sidelong, trying not to show too much concern.

He was just tired, Thor told himself. That was perfectly normal.

"They're so happy to see me," Loki said suddenly, staring straight ahead.

"Yes," Thor said carefully. "Why should they not be?"

"Do they not wonder why it should be that I return while their loved ones do not? Do you not imagine that some might think it unfair?"

Thor hesitated. "It may be so," he said, "but why should they hold that against you?"

Loki shook his head. "You know well that in grief people do not think logically." He shook himself and looked toward Thor with a quick smile. "Forgive me. I should not...brood."

Thor tried for a smile. "You are permitted to do whatever you like, Loki. And such a habit is hardly unfamiliar for you."

"No," Loki said, "I suppose it is not." But he didn't smile back. Thor shifted.

"Are you...Loki, are you well?"

"Better than I have been in some time, brother," Loki said.

"That is not precisely an answer."

"I..." Loki sighed. "I suppose I am not certain." Thor waited, hoping for more, but when Loki looked at him he just smiled faintly. "I am well enough, Thor. I am here. I am alive. And I have more freedom than I dared hope I would ever have again. I can hardly complain."

Well enough, Thor thought, was little endorsement. But he did not want to argue - did not want to press. Not right now.

He could always return to the matter later. Anytime, because Loki would be here to ask. And everything else aside - however much *everything else* there was - it felt like for the first time in a very long time, something was as it should be.

Loki fell into (Thor's) bed early, plainly exhausted. In truth, Thor was not a little relieved - certainly Loki needed the rest. Weary as Thor himself was, he chose to stay awake himself and keep watch, some unacknowledged fear lurking that he might still wake and find Loki gone.

He slept like the dead for perhaps three hours and then woke up screaming, clawing his way out of the blankets and to his feet before Thor blocked the door and stopped him from bolting. Loki snarled and twisted only to freeze, panting.

"Loki," Thor said, trying to keep his voice even and calm, "it's just me."

Loki's eyes were wide, wild, white visible all around the irises. He fought to pull back, to extricate himself from Thor's grip. "Let go of me," he said, his voice rising. "Let go of me, don't *touch* me—"

Thor let go like he'd been burned and Loki stumbled away, his hands up like he was warding off an attack, breathing in loud, uneven gasps. "Be at ease," Thor said, raising his own hands to show they were empty. "No one is going to hurt you."

Loki's hands twitched. His body spasmed, tensing even more. "Stay back," he said. "I don't - I can't—" His inhaleds grew shorter and shorter, little better than gasps.

"It's all right," Thor tried again. "You're safe."

Loki took another step back, pressing against the wall and staring at Thor with wide-eyed panic. Something twanged in Thor's chest like a snapped harp string.

"Do you know me?" He asked. It came out sounding more pathetic than he would have wished.

Loki's eyes clouded, then cleared. "Thor?" He said, and then, "*Thor*, help me, I can't breathe, he's killing me—"

Thor lurched forward but Loki reared back even as he gasped, chest heaving, the look in his eyes growing wilder and more and more frightened.

"Breathe, Loki," Thor said urgently. "Breathe in—"

"I - *can't*," Loki said, and Thor shook his head.

"You *can*," he insisted. "Just try. Try to take a deep breath and hold it. You can do it. With me, inhale," and he did, loudly, deliberately. Loki's inhale hitched and broke, his whole body shaking. "Again," Thor said, and Loki let out a thin sound but breathed in, shuddering, fighting his body, his *mind*, for every inch.

"Good," Thor said, still trying to sound gentle, self-assured, not like his heart was pounding in his ears. "That's good. Keep going."

He kept pace with Loki as his hitching inhaleds and exhaleds gradually evened out, little by little, the panic ebbing back until Thor dared approach him. Loki didn't try to fend him off, just looked up at Thor with exhaustion written on every line of his face. Exhaustion, and shame, and he slumped, sliding down the wall to sit folded against it.

“Not so free after all, it seems,” he mumbled under his breath.

“It’s your first night back,” Thor protested. “It doesn’t mean anything.”

Loki put his face in his hands. “I thought this was over,” he said, muffled. “The more fool I.”

Thor swallowed, moving gingerly over to crouch down in front of Loki. “It’s only a bad dream,” he said. “You’ve had those almost all your life.”

“Maybe I did have a touch of foresight, after all.” Thor almost wondered, but Loki shook his head a moment later, still not looking up. “It’s - *pathetic*. Rank weakness, and I’ve had enough of that, of being *weak*, of being - being *fragile*, jumping at Norns-damned *shadows*—”

“What you’ve endured would break a lesser man,” Thor said.

“I *am* broken!” Loki said, his head jerking up, his eyes red-rimmed. “*Look* at me, Thor. Do I seem whole to you?”

“Yes,” Thor said, not certain if it was truth or lie. Loki shook his head, lips twisting in a bitter, humorless smile.

“You can’t believe that,” he said. “You’re not that naive. Not anymore.”

“Even *if* that were true,” Thor said, with careful emphasis, “what is broken can be mended.”

“Sometimes,” Loki said. “Not always.”

Thor reached out to put his hands on Loki’s shoulders only to stop when Loki flinched. Loki winced, perhaps for what must be naked dismay on Thor’s face, and said, “It isn’t you.” Thor’s stomach hurt and he looked away, hatred and misery blazing up at the same time.

“I’m sorry,” he said again. It felt like he couldn’t stop saying it, even now.

“Don’t be,” Loki said. “I would still be - *there* if it weren’t for you.” He didn’t move, though, still sitting in the corner with his back to the wall like it was safer there. Thor stayed where he was as well. “It isn’t your fault I’m not...that I am *this*.” He gestured at himself, and Thor’s heart twisted.

“You are right,” he said. “I have nothing to do with your resilience. That is entirely yours.”

“Resilience?” Loki let out a humorless sort of *ha*. “I would have given up fifty times if it were not for the knowledge that you did not deserve it.”

Thor flinched. “I wish you held your life a little dearer,” he said, voice hoarse. Loki sighed and looked away.

“It isn’t that,” he said.

“Isn’t it?” Thor asked. “You said it: that you sacrificed yourself for me, because you thought that I had to be the one to survive. You urged me to let go, to walk away from Sakaar. *You* let go—” Now it was Loki’s turn to flinch, and Thor looked down at the floor with a sigh. “I don’t mean to...now isn’t the time.”

“It never is.” Loki seemed to fold inward. “It isn’t much, is it? Look what I’ve done with it. Much of infamy and little of note.”

“If you truly believe that,” Thor said, “then you are the fool you have always named me.”

Loki stared at him several long moments, then sighed. "I am so tired, Thor," he murmured. "I feel sometimes as though I've been tired for decades, and yet I can never *rest*."

"You can rest now," Thor said gently.

"Somewhat," Loki said. "Between dreams."

"I will be here," Thor said. "I can sit beside you, iff that may help you sleep easier."

Loki closed his eyes, shoulders slumping. "It may," he said, after long silence.

Thor hesitated. "The bed is small," he said. "I may have to touch you."

Loki's hands opened and closed and he nodded. "It's fine," he said. "Before, I was just...still shaking off the dream." He gave Thor a crooked smile, still without humor in it. "I know you have no untoward intentions."

Thor tried not to imagine Loki, unsafe even in sleep. Perhaps he did not manage to keep his expression smooth, because Loki looked away. "It's fine," he repeated.

"It's up to you," Thor said. He thought he caught a brief flash of gratitude in Loki's eyes.

"It might at least be worth a try," Loki said. "If it means a little sleep clear of dreams."

Thor extended a hand to help Loki back to his feet; after a moment he took it, and walked back to the bed like he was approaching a battlefield. Thor lay down next to him, trying to brush against him as little as possible. Loki made a sort of huffing noise.

"I'm not going to stab you," he said, tone caustic though his voice wobbled a little.

"I know," Thor said simply. "I just don't want to...crowd you."

"I told you," Loki said. "It was just the dream. I am not afraid of *you*." Still, Thor could feel the tension in his body, and wasn't sure if he should listen to what Loki was saying or what he seemed to feel. Loki always pushed himself. The more when he thought he needed to prove something.

"Suit yourself," Loki said, while Thor was still debating with himself, and rolled to his side, facing away from Thor with his shoulders hunched. Thor held in his sigh and tried to relax.

"It does help," Loki said abruptly, back still turned. "Having you here. It feels safer."

Thor's chest warmed. "Good," he said. "That is as it should be." *Even when it isn't true*, murmured that soft, poisonous, voice. Thor shoved it away.

Loki didn't answer. His breathing evened out slowly. Thor fought to stay awake, but his eyes drifted closed over and over again until he finally surrendered.

There were no further disturbances that night.

Thor had known better than to think that all would be well once Loki was free of Sakaar and the Grandmaster, and yet some part of him had still believed it would be so. He was quickly disabused of his mistake.

Loki was skittish, restless, fidgety. He watched almost everyone with wary watchfulness, and shied away from speaking with them. Unexpected things seemed to set him off - sometimes Thor didn't

even know what it *was*, or recognize it happening until he realized Loki was wound like a spring and vibrating with tension. One minute he would snap at Thor to leave him alone, and the next he practically clung to his side like a burr. He slept too much or too little.

None of this, Thor thought, was anything he knew how to handle. He felt like he was stumbling forward blind, terrified that he was going to do something wrong and send Loki irrevocably over the edge.

Or else that someone else might. It was hard to resist the impulse to shield his brother from anyone - *everyone* - else.

“Stop treating him like glass,” Brunnhilde said roughly. Thor scowled at her, and she scowled back at him. “It isn’t helping.”

“What do you know about what would help him,” Thor shot back. “As *you* are the picture of well-adjusted health.”

She flushed. “Like *you* are,” she snapped. “I just know what I see.”

“Then what *am* I supposed to do?” Thor demanded. Brunnhilde’s lips twisted, and Thor snorted. “You don’t know either.”

“You’re right,” she said after a moment. “I don’t. Maybe you should just get him drunk and see what falls out.”

“No,” Thor said harshly. “I’m not doing that.” Especially not since he’d just the other day found Loki shaky and pale, skin sheened with sweat, hunched over with his lips a tight line of pain.

“What’s wrong?” He’d asked, panic kicking up in his belly. Loki squeezed his eyes closed with a sound like a half-swallowed moan.

“Side effects of my body purging what’s left of Sakaar,” he said, voice thin. “It shouldn’t last much longer.”

“Last much...” Thor swore. “How long has this been going on?”

Loki bent forward, sucking in a few breaths. “Three days?” He said, after a long pause. Thor wanted to shout, grab Loki and shake him, and held his breath until the urge ebbed a little. A *little*.

“And you didn’t tell me?”

Loki made another small noise. “No,” he said, something defiant in his voice. “I didn’t.”

“I could have *helped*.”

“Not really.” Loki shuddered, and visibly forced himself to straighten. “It’ll be fine. It’ll be fine. I’ve managed worse than this.” His smile was strained. “I died, remember?”

Thor’s breath snagged in his chest. The words were full of bravado but Loki’s voice shook, and for Thor himself it still felt like a knife in the chest. “Don’t say that,” he said, harsher than he meant to. “Don’t - *joke* about it. I still can’t—” He trailed off. Loki looked down and away, and nodded.

“I’m sorry,” he said after a moment. “Force of habit, I suppose. I—” He cut off, pressing the back of his hand to his mouth and gulping, turning a little green. Thor cast about for a basin, but Loki seemed to succeed in fighting it back.

“Let me help you,” Thor said, wincing inwardly at the naked plea in his voice. Loki took a few shallow breaths that sounded like they hurt, and then dropped his head forward.

“There’s very little you can do, Thor,” he said wearily. “I just have to wait it out.”

No, Thor was not going to help Loki fall back into the easy escape that alcohol would offer just so that he could lose him in a new way.

Brunnhilde held up her hands defensively. “I wasn’t *serious*,” she said. “Don’t jump down my throat about it.”

Thor felt a pang of guilt. “I know you’re just trying to help,” he said.

“And I know I’m not good at it,” she said. Her laugh sounded forced. “We’re just about the worst people to help anyone get over trauma, aren’t we?”

Thor wanted to disagree, but he couldn’t, really. Something must have shown on his face, because Brunnhilde patted his arm awkwardly.

“It could be worse,” she said.

Of course it could be worse, Thor thought with another flash of anger. *It has been worse*. But he forced a strained smile.

“And I’ll make it better,” he said, with more confidence than he felt. Somehow. *Somehow*.

Norns, let me have this, Thor thought. *Don’t we deserve a victory?*

He should have expected it.

A little over a week after Loki’s return and Steve Rogers called the phone Thor had been ignoring for months. “Hey,” he said when Thor picked up, sounding surprised to get an answer. “You around?”

“I am,” Thor said carefully. Steve exhaled.

“Good,” he said. “That’s...good. Nat told me - told us what was going on, and I’ve been trying to - never mind. We thought we’d come around to...strategize.”

Strategize what, Thor thought, and then remembered his conversation with Natasha. About Loki. Her promise to catch the others up and offering of help. Help with getting Loki back.

Thor looked over his shoulder, but Loki wasn’t there - he recalled something about Sif awkwardly inviting him to join her for sparring, a proposal that made him decidedly nervous. But he needed to trust her. And Loki.

“Oh,” he said. “Yes. Right.”

A pause. “Did something new happen?” Steve asked, dread audible in his voice.

He could lie. Loki was hardly in any condition to deal with people who only knew him as an enemy. He might lash out, or buckle, or react in some way that Thor couldn’t possibly predict. Perhaps it would be better to ensure that they stayed at a distance, ignorant of Loki’s return.

No. He wasn’t going to keep Loki a secret. His friends would just have to find a way to accept his

presence.

“Actually, yes,” Thor said. “Loki is back.”

Perfect silence on the other end of the line. “You mean...back here? On Earth?”

“Yes,” Thor said. “I managed to free him. He’s here with me now.”

“For how long?” Steve asked.

“Just over a week, now,” Thor said.

“Were you going to say something?”

“Eventually,” Thor said. He waited.

“I think we should still come around,” Steve said slowly. Clearly trying to be careful. Thor tried not to stiffen.

“For what purpose?”

“Thor...” Steve blew out a breath. “Last time Loki was on Earth it didn’t exactly go well.”

“That was then.” *And since - he was brutally murdered, resurrected only to be leashed by a sadistic immortal who used and abused and raped him-* Thor forced himself to calm before he could lose his temper. “Loki isn’t the same person.”

“Maybe,” Steve said, “but I think we’d all rest easier if we could...confirm that for ourselves. I know I would.”

You said you would help, Thor wanted to snap. *Was that only true when it was hypothetical?*

“If your friends want to come to affirm I am no longer a threat,” said a quiet voice behind him, “let them. They will only find a way around you if you refuse.”

Thor turned, pulling the phone down from his ear to look at Loki, who looked back at him, expressionless. “You don’t have to prove anything,” Thor said.

“You know that isn’t true.”

There was no way to ask *are you up for this?* without insulting Loki. Thor stared at him, and Loki stared back, and he was probably right. They would just try to soothe their fears some other way. It would be better to let them do so where Thor could keep an eye on things.

He raised the phone again. “Very well,” he said, still watching Loki. “You may come as you see fit. Though I ask that you keep your numbers small.”

“How about me, Natasha, and Wanda,” Steve said.

“Not Tony?” Thor asked, still keeping a close eye on Loki.

“He’s got the baby,” Steve said. “No heroics until she’s at least five. He says.”

“No heroics will be necessary,” Thor said firmly. “But the three of you would be welcome.”

“We’ll come by tomorrow afternoon?” Steve said. Thor glanced at Loki, whose expression was

still impassive.

“Tomorrow,” he said. “Very well.” He hung up and met Loki’s eyes. “If they try to cause you any difficulty, I will not hesitate to throw them out.”

“Don’t.” Loki glanced away. “You’d only be making things worse.”

Thor growled in the back of his throat. “They should know better than to trifle with me.”

“And you don’t think that if you are suddenly hostile they might believe I am manipulating you?” There was no anger in Loki’s voice - it was quiet, and tired, and implacably reasonable. And he was probably right.

“I don’t care,” Thor said.

“Touching,” Loki said, “but again - not necessarily helpful.”

“What should I do, then?” Thor demanded. “Allow them to poke and prod at you as they please? Haven’t you had enough of that?” He regretted saying it the moment it was out of his mouth, even before he saw Loki flinch.

“If it comes to that,” Loki said, his voice wobbling very slightly, “I’ll throw them out myself.”

Thor was, bizarrely, almost relieved. “And that would be better than me doing it?”

Loki smiled crookedly. “At least then they won’t think you bewitched. And you can always apologize later.”

There it was again, Thor thought, almost wistfully. That flash of the old Loki, shining through the wreckage. He clung to those glimpses - treasured them, hoping they were signs of healing.

The plane landed just after midday.

Loki had spent the morning trying to pretend at unconcern, but the twisting of his hands gave him away even when he wasn’t pacing restlessly back and forth. It made Thor itch, but he didn’t tell Loki to stop. He had a right to be nervous.

It was Loki’s sharp ears that first picked up the approaching aircraft, his eyes lifting to scan the sky a few moments before Thor heard the same. “Let’s walk to where they’ll land,” he suggested. Loki jerked his head in a nod, pale and looking for a moment like he wanted to bolt before visibly reining himself in. “Sif and Brunnhilde are coming with us,” Thor said, hoping that would be some reassurance. Loki gave him a quick sidelong look.

“Do you want to look like you’re readying for a fight?” He asked.

“They know Brunnhilde,” Thor said, a bit defensively. “I’m not trying to *threaten* anyone.” Though a part of him, Thor realized, was braced to have to do exactly that. He wouldn’t be happy about it, and he didn’t *want* to, but—

He wasn’t going to let go of Loki again. Ever.

Standing in the clearing as the Quinjet descended, Loki took a place on Thor’s left, with Brunnhilde on Thor’s right and Sif on Loki’s other side, her arms crossed and faint frown lines between her eyebrows.

"This seems like a bad idea," Brunnhilde murmured.

"Loki seems to think it's necessary," Thor said.

"I can hear you," Loki said, his eyes tracking the landing of the plane.

"Oh, well, if *Loki* thinks so," Brunnhilde said. Thor tensed, but Loki said nothing. Sif shifted her weight.

"All will be well," she said with determined certainty.

Loki's lips twisted. "That's what people say when it won't," he said under his breath, and then straightened, clasping his hands behind his back as the ramp came down. Thor stepped forward, and Brunnhilde followed him as he walked to meet his friends.

Steve looked him over quickly and for some reason seemed relieved, though he hesitated a moment before Thor took the initiative and embraced him. Steve pulled back, a small smile touching the corners of his mouth.

"It's good to see you," he said, and sounded like he meant it.

"And you," Thor said. "I am...sorry I have been so much absent."

Steve's smile fell away. "I get it," he said. "You've..." His eyes slid briefly to the side and then back. "Had it pretty rough."

Thor didn't argue. He stepped away so he could look at the other two who'd come with Steve. Brunnhilde and Natasha had their heads bent together, talking quietly enough that Thor could only hear every other word. Wanda was looking past Thor, and without turning he knew at whom. He did turn, though, trying to catch Loki's eye. His face was blank, expressionless, and Thor knew why but he still wanted to wince.

"Loki," he said, but didn't know what to say next.

"I assume no introductions are necessary," Loki said, sounding distant.

"We haven't met," Wanda said, and if she sounded cautious she at least didn't sound hostile. Loki's eyes flicked toward her and then away.

"You know me," he said. "That's the relevant thing here, isn't it?"

All trace of a smile had gone from Steve's face, and Natasha gave Brunnhilde what looked like a warning glance before turning toward Loki. "So," she said. "You're back."

Loki blinked slowly. "On Midgard or among the living?" He still sounded...distant. Like someone else was talking through him, in his voice. Like Loki himself had gone...somewhere else. He heard Loki saying *it wasn't me, it was someone else* and thought miserably *oh, Loki*. He saw Natasha's eyes narrow.

Steve stepped toward Loki and Thor saw Loki tense, very slightly. Maybe Steve saw it as well, because he stopped. "Thor says you've changed," he said.

"He would, wouldn't he?" Loki said, and Thor could have groaned.

"Loki," he said, but Loki didn't even glance at him.

“That is what you are thinking, isn’t it?” Loki’s voice was still quiet, even, too calm. “That he is willfully blind to my faults?”

“Nobody said that,” Natasha said.

“You didn’t need to. And it is not an unreasonable train of thought. But I assure you that I have no interest in causing anyone on your planet harm.”

“You know that assurance doesn’t mean a lot,” Natasha said bluntly.

“I suppose it doesn’t,” Loki said after a moment. “But I have nothing else to offer.”

“There is something,” Steve said slowly. “If you let Wanda look in your head—”

Loki’s eyes widened and he recoiled, the mask breaking. “No,” he interrupted.

Steve’s eyebrows pulled together. “She wouldn’t hurt—”

“I said *no*,” Loki said, and took an unsteady step back, away, his voice suddenly loud and sharp. Green sparked around his fingers, flickering like flames before Loki clenched his fists and it vanished. “She doesn’t touch me. *None* of you touch me.”

Sif stepped toward him, glowering, and reached out to lay a hand on his shoulder, but Loki flinched away from her too. Thor heard Loki take three quick, shallow breaths, visibly clawing himself back from the edge. Steve held up his hands, tensing but not moving to attack.

“Okay,” he said. “Okay. Got it.” He glanced sideways at Wanda, but she was looking at Loki, her eyebrows furrowed.

“What happened?” She asked, her voice quiet. Loki glanced at her and then - flinched.

“Is it relevant?” He asked, his voice strung tight.

She glanced away. “Maybe not.”

“If Loki’s word isn’t enough, mine ought to be,” Thor said, keeping a close eye on his brother, who seemed inches from collapse.

Natasha made a sort of “hm” noise and glanced at Brunnhilde, who looked back at her evenly. Thor wondered what they’d been talking about.

“You caused a lot of damage here,” Steve said, quieter.

Loki let out a humorless *ha*. “I would think you had a different metric for damage, now,” he said, and if Thor grimaced for the words, he wondered if anyone else could hear the bitterness underneath. He moved to stand beside Loki, one hand hovering near his back but not touching.

“Thanos was the one who sent Loki here to begin with,” he said, trying to ignore Loki’s slight twitch.

“Thor,” Loki said. His eyes flicked from Steve to Wanda to Natasha, back to Wanda. Like he was trying to decide from which direction the attack would come. Thor stiffened for the tone in his voice, recognizing it from Sakaar when Loki thought that Thor was putting himself in danger.

“No,” Thor said. “Whatever you are thinking, Loki, don’t bother to say it.”

Loki's lips pressed together in a line. Wanda shifted.

"It's all right," she said. "You don't have to be scared."

Loki twisted, his eyes widening again, and his lips peeled back from his teeth. "Stop it," he said.

Wanda blinked. "I'm not," she said.

"Stop it," Loki repeated, louder. "Get out, get *away from me*—"

Wanda took a step back. Steve took a step forward, shifting toward an attack, and Thor saw Sif put a hand on her sword. Brunnhilde moved faster than Thor could, striding into Loki's path.

"Hey," she said loudly. "Focus. This isn't Sakaar, and she's not going to do anything to you."

Loki's chest heaved. His eyes roved back and forth and finally fixed on Brunnhilde when she snapped her fingers. "There," she said, quieter. "Better."

Thor glanced at his friends, all of them staring, and wanted to snap at them to look away. At the same time...Steve looked troubled, and if Natasha was hard to read, she didn't *look* on the verge of attack. Wanda's hands were still half raised, but there was no trace of magic around her fingers.

Loki's jaw worked a moment, and then his eyes closed. "I can't stay here," he said abruptly. "Find me when you're done." He turned on his heel and walked away. Thor caught Sif's eye and mouthed *go with him*. She nodded, and went.

To Thor's relief, no one objected. Brunnhilde met Thor's eyes for a moment, then turned around.

"So," she said dryly. "Any questions?"

"Plenty," Steve said. He paused. "He's not...completely stable, is he?"

"Loki is as well as anyone could be who has been through what he has," Thor said defensively.

"No," Brunnhilde said to Steve. "He's not." Thor glared at her.

Natasha tapped her foot against the ground. "That could make him more dangerous, not less."

"Loki isn't any danger to you or to this Realm," Thor said. "Even *before* - all this happened, I meant to bring him here, with every confidence that it would be safe. And now—"

He cut off, thinking of Loki's shame. *Pathetic. Rank weakness. Broken.*

And now, he would say, and now it is all he can do to get through the days. Don't you understand, can't you see that he isn't who he was, that that was never who he was?

Steve rubbed his eyes. "I want to believe you, Thor. You deserve...but it's hard." He paused. "Is there any way you could talk Loki into letting Wanda..."

Thor thought of his dream, of the Grandmaster in his head, of Loki sleeping only with the Grandmaster's *help*. Thought of Thanos and the Mind Gem and Loki's madness, recognizable but twisted by rage, vicious as a cornered animal.

"He might agree," Thor said, "but I won't ask."

"Thor," Steve said, pained.

“Steve,” Natasha said, “it’d be a bad idea.” He eyed her, and she said, “trust me. All else aside - does Wanda want to be saddled with that?”

Wanda looked like she wanted to say something and was holding it back. “What,” Thor said bluntly.

“I wouldn’t,” she said after a moment. “Even if he *did* agree, I wouldn’t do it. It’d still be a violation. I know how easy it is to agree to things you don’t want because you think you have to. And I...” She hesitated, glancing toward Steve and Natasha. “From what I can tell, he’s not - crazy. Or angry. Just tired, and scared, and hurting.”

“You know that?” Thor asked, frowning.

“Not because of magic,” she said, with a very small smile. Thor looked at Natasha, surprised that *she* wasn’t the one to say it. She didn’t seem surprised, though, and Thor wondered what Brunnhilde had told her; why she’d been so quiet.

Steve still looked torn. “Natasha?” He said.

“You know what we’re going to do, Steve,” she said. “You’re just hesitating because you feel like you should. The facts are these. It’s been almost a decade since Loki was here, and the damage then was - comparatively - pretty minor. And now we know that Thanos was behind that, too, even if we don’t know the level of compulsion or coercion that was involved. Though from some things Clint’s said, it seems like Loki was on a pretty short leash.” She glanced at Thor like she thought he might interrupt. He didn’t; honestly he didn’t know much more than they did about Loki’s missing year. Loki had been carefully vague in revealing it at all, speaking around the entire subject in circles. Thor had always meant to press him on it later, but later never came.

“Secondly,” Natasha went on, “Loki died. One of Thanos’s early casualties. And dying doesn’t make up for anything, but - it does suggest at the very least a certain amount of devotion to Thor.”

I died trying to protect you. Thor kept himself from sucking in a sharp breath.

“Now he’s back, true,” Natasha said. “And you know what I see from where I’m standing? A traumatized mess who’s been a defacto prisoner on a planet run by an alien dictator with nearly unlimited powers whose hobbies include making his slaves fight to the death.”

“Who’s been what?” Steve said, his voice suddenly sharpening. “You didn’t say—”

“Yeah, because Thor didn’t,” Natasha said, her voice hardening a little. “Maybe he thought it wasn’t *relevant*. So...thanks, Brunnhilde, for letting me in on that little detail that would’ve probably been good to know when we were approaching how to handle this meeting.”

Thor glanced at Brunnhilde, starting to scowl. Once again, he thought, she’d told something that she had no right to share, he’d withheld that information *intentionally* because he *knew* how much Loki would hate it—

No, he realized. That wasn’t it. Not because of Loki. He hadn’t said because he didn’t want his friends to know how bad it was, what he’d done. The hell he’d dropped Loki into. *He* was ashamed. And the appalled look on Wanda’s face, on *Steve’s*, only made that shame cut deeper.

“Thor,” Steve said, and then stopped. He dropped his head forward, eyes squeezing closed and then opening. “Well,” he said after a moment. “Guess that explains some things. Don’t suppose there’s any chance this alien dictator had psychic powers, is there?” Thor didn’t think he needed to answer. “Yeah,” Steve said after a moment, sounding tired. “Definitely explains some things.”

“My assessment is that Loki’s not a threat,” Natasha said. “Not anymore. And maybe this is brutal to say, but honestly - even if he did try something, the condition he’s in? I don’t think he’d get far.”

Thor almost wanted to protest, even though it was exactly what he *needed* them to conclude, and...she wasn’t wrong. He was only glad Loki wasn’t here to hear it.

Steve sighed. “You’re right,” he said. “I can’t...he can stay here.”

Thor wouldn’t have accepted any other answer, but he still relaxed. “Thank you.”

Steve made a bit of a face. “Do you need...help?”

“No, thank you,” Thor said, polite but firm. “We’ll manage.”

“Can we stay for a bit?” Steve asked. “I’d like to take a little time to...catch up. Haven’t seen much of you lately.” His smile was weak, but it was an attempt. Thor wanted to refuse, wanted to go and find Loki, but...his friends deserved better from him. Steve deserved better.

“You would be welcome,” he said. Brunnhilde had a hand on Natasha’s shoulder and was murmuring to her again. Natasha nodded, and Brunnhilde turned away to walk over to Thor.

“I’m going to find Sif,” she said, with the unspoken *and Loki*. Thor caught her arm.

“What did you tell her?” He asked lowly. Brunnhilde gave him a hard look.

“Nothing more than what she said,” she said finally. “Nothing about the exact nature of Loki’s relationship to the Grandmaster. Is that what you wanted to know?”

It had been. Thor let go of her.

“If you don’t think he should be ashamed,” Brunnhilde said, “maybe you should work on not acting like you are.”

She walked away. Thor frowned after her before turning back. Wanda looked like she was on the edge of saying something, and stopped herself.

Thor pasted a smile on his face. “Come, friends,” he said. “New Asgard is hardly great, but we will make you welcome.”

Loki didn’t show his face again while Steve, Wanda, and Natasha stayed. Steve asked - *is there any chance I could talk to your brother?* - but Thor shook his head and said *I don’t think now is the time*. He paused, then, and asked, *what would you want to say?*

Steve shook his head. *I don’t know. I guess if he’s going to be staying here...he’s so important to you. Seems like I should at least try to get to know him.*

Thor wasn’t sure what to make of that.

“He’s fine,” Sif told him, when he asked her. And then added, “more or less. Naturally he isn’t talking to *me*.” He wasn’t talking to Thor, either, though he was there when Thor went to sleep, breathing too evenly to truly be resting.

“So I am to stay?” He said the evening after the small band of humans departed, lying with his back to Thor as he undressed for bed. “I am not to be caged, or cast out, or...”

“Yes,” Thor interrupted. “You are staying.”

Loki went limp and exhaled. “Oh,” he said after a beat. “That’s good.”

“You doubted it?” Thor asked, meaning *you doubted me*? Loki rolled to his back and stared upward.

“I doubt everything, Thor,” he said. “Not just you.” He exhaled slowly. “I feel mad with it, sometimes. I *crave*...certainty. Clarity.” Loki’s eyes closed. “That was *his* gift. It was a hideous certainty. An ugly clarity. But it was something, and I grabbed onto it with both hands even as it burned.”

Thor almost held his breath. It was the first time he could remember Loki speaking in any detail, however vague, about his experience with Thanos - and it was Thanos, that *his* unnamed. Of that Thor was certain.

“The Grandmaster was the same,” Loki said, that distant note in his voice again. “In certain ways. With him, it was...release. All the noise and dazzle but when it came down to it, with him - no questions, no doubts, no hesitations. I could give over - everything. The Grandmaster’s ownership - his *truth* - may have been more - intimately cruel than *his*. But it hurt less.”

Thor stood awkwardly in the center of the room, still half undressed.

“A part of me misses it,” Loki said, and Thor’s stomach lurched sideways. “Not...not a large part. But the way he could rip me out of my head, flay away the layers of my thoughts. Make me nothing.”

Thor’s stomach twisted into knots. “You were never nothing.”

“He made me feel like it,” Loki exhaled slowly and shook his head. “None of this - it doesn’t matter. It’s over.” He sounded like he was trying to convince himself.

“It is,” Thor said, hoping that he sounded more convincing. Loki’s eyes were still closed.

“It is perverse, isn’t it?” He said. “That I should feel as I do. It feels like evidence of my degeneracy. Proof that I deserved—”

“No,” Thor interrupted loudly. “You didn’t deserve - any of it.” Loki didn’t reply, and Thor took a step toward him. “Do you hear me? You did not deserve what they did to you.”

Loki opened his eyes. His smile was melancholy. “Ah, Thor,” he said. “You have always thought more kindly of me than you ought.”

“And you have always thought less kindly than you should,” Thor countered. Loki glanced away.

“If I could be certain of anything,” he said, “it would be of you.”

That should have been a comfort. It was probably meant to be. Thor didn’t know why it made him so sad.

Thor was dreaming again: back on the Statesman, watching Thanos wrap his hand around Loki’s throat and lift him off his feet, fingers tightening with excruciating slowness as Loki struggled, choking—

He came awake hard and for a moment thought the dream had followed him before he realized that

no, he could hear Loki choking, his body convulsing with spasms. Alarm shot through Thor like a bolt of his own lightning.

“Loki!” Thor said, voice raised almost to a shout.

The surge of raw power threw Thor back and across the cabin, hard enough into the wall that Thor felt wood crack. He caught just a brief glimpse of Loki as he clawed the door open and bolted out into the night.

Thor surged back to his feet and followed him, heart pounding, imagining Loki disappearing into thin air, or else causing himself harm, or someone *else* that would make him seen again as nothing but a menace.

He kept himself from bellowing Loki’s name, instead sweeping the dark, waiting for his eyes to adjust, and finally breathed out in relief.

He hadn’t gone far. Maybe ten feet, and he was kneeling with his head bent forward and panting. Thor approached him slowly.

“I’m awake now,” Loki said, his voice hoarse. He’d vomited on the grass a few feet away.

“Are you all right?” Thor asked, crouching down next to him, and clarified with, “it sounded like you couldn’t breathe.”

“I couldn’t,” Loki said. Thor saw his dream again (his memory) and tried to shake it away. Loki’s inhale trembled. “He didn’t need to - do it like that. He could have made it fast. Clean. But he didn’t. He wanted me to know - to *feel* - every second of what was happening, to watch death closing in and make sure it hurt.” Thor’s stomach heaved, but Loki wasn’t done. “And...and he wanted...wanted *you* to feel it, too.” There was something of a sob to the way Loki breathed out. “How is it fair that I can remember nothing of Valhalla but remember every second of dying?”

Thor’s heart felt unbearably heavy and he shifted so that he was sitting next to Loki. “It isn’t,” he said. “It isn’t fair.”

Loki swallowed. “He’s dead,” he said quietly. “He’s dead, and I’m alive, and I am still afraid. I still feel his hand around my neck, and I’m trying to tell you to look away, to close your eyes, and I am so damned *terrified*.”

Thor felt like *his* throat was being squeezed. “Did you believe that there was a chance that it would work?” He asked. “Even a little?”

“I wanted to believe it,” Loki said. “But I don’t think I did. I thought - *well, I’ve already nearly died twice. How much worse can it be?*” His gaze was far away, staring at nothing. Thor took a shuddering breath, afraid he would start to cry.

“You were so brave,” he said. Loki huffed quietly, and Thor shook his head. “I mean it. To even *try*—” He laughed weakly, humorlessly. “I wish you had been *less* brave.”

“No going back now, is there?” Loki dropped his head forward. “I still thought it was worth it, in the end. Giving you the chance to get away.”

I didn’t, Thor thought. *Not really. I would have died with you, I think, if it had been my choice.*

“I’m just glad you’re here with me now,” Thor said, trying to focus on that - not the terrible stillness of Loki’s chest against his cheek, not the cold of waking up alone on the Guardians’ ship. Loki was here. Alive. Sitting next to him.

He wondered how long he would need to keep reminding himself of that.

“I don’t know that I deserve this,” Loki said softly.

Thor glanced at him, narrowing his eyes. “Deserve what?”

“This,” Loki said, gesturing vaguely. “Everything you’ve done. Being alive. Free. What is this, my - third chance? Fourth? Why am I here when others far better than me are not? Frigga, or Heimdall, or...”

“I asked for you,” Thor said.

Loki’s lips twisted. “You could have asked for anyone.”

“I didn’t,” Thor said. “I asked for *you*. Because I wanted *you*. I grieve...I grieve for everyone. All the lost. But you...you are my family. My brother. The other half of my soul.” He swallowed past the lump in his throat. “It isn’t a matter of deserving. It is a matter of - of selfishness. I wanted you here. And now you are.”

“None of this answers my question,” Loki said, though his voice sounded rough.

“That’s because you’re asking the wrong question,” Thor said. “Deserving, not deserving - that doesn’t matter. What matters is that you’re here. And what you’re going to do now.”

Loki was quiet for a long time. “I don’t know,” he said finally, barely audible.

“Neither do I,” Thor said. “All we can do is find out. And I’d like...I’d like to do that together.”

Loki was quiet for a long moment and Thor’s stomach sank, suddenly afraid that with his freedom Loki might now decide to leave. Might think he needed to, to prove his independence. Might decide that he’d given enough, been through enough, and much of it for Thor’s sake.

Then Loki sighed, and leaned toward him so his shoulder rested against Thor’s. “I wouldn’t have it any other way.”

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